



Stuart Hall and Power

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When thinking about Stuart Hall's theoretical legacy, 'power' is probably not the first term that comes to mind. Concepts like representation, racism, ethnicity, encoding/decoding, articulation, conjunctural analysis etc. more readily suggest themselves and structure our reception of his work. Yet nonetheless, when taking a closer look, his entire oeuvre may be said to be permeated, on different levels, by themes that touch upon the issue of power, not least in connection with the concepts listed above. The latent omnipresence of power in Hall's thinking is perhaps most readily detectable on the meta-level on which he situates and positions himself as a cultural-studies scholar, and it is this level that hence will be addressed first. In the second section, Hall's view of power on the economic, social and state levels will be considered, particularly by pointing out his indebtedness to Antonio Gramsci's conception of hegemonic power. In an attempt to let Hall speak for himself as much as possible, the section will provide quite a few quotes, many of which will be taken from the collaboratively written *Policing the Crisis*, in order to shed some light on his – and his co-authors' – ideas about power. The third section attempts a systematisation of the issues raised, particularly by integrating a Foucauldian perspective on power, which was nearly as important for Hall as the Gramscian. The last section will conclude by returning to the beginning, reconsidering Hall's self-positioning within the power/knowledge nexus that structures the discourse of cultural studies.

“Speaking autobiographically”: Hall, Power, and Cultural Studies

In “Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies”, Hall, before tracing three defining formative “theoretical moments” (1996a: 263) in this field, introduces his observations by slipping into a defensive attitude, stressing in the negative what he is *not* about to do: “I don't want to talk about British cultural studies (which is in any case a pretty awkward signifier for me) in a patriarchal way, as the keeper of conscience of cultural studies, hoping to police you back into line with what it really was if only you knew.” (262) By way of this disclaimer, Hall draws attention to two premises on the basis of which he hopes his text will be decoded. To begin with, via the pronouns 'I' and 'you', the



text explicitly reveals itself as an element within a potentially reciprocal communication situation (premise 1). In addition, Hall is aware yet deeply sceptical of the elevated position he is commonly accorded as one of the ‘founding fathers’ (“in a patriarchal way”) of British cultural studies, and hence as a holder of ‘true knowledge’ (“what it really was”, ironically referencing the guiding principle of Leopold von Ranke’s 19th-century historicism: *wie es eigentlich gewesen*). Whereas the notion of a “keeper of conscience” may still carry positive connotations for some – in the tradition of the ‘benign’ patriarch, for example – the verb “to police”, as well as the entire phrase “to police you back into line” within which the addressed ‘you’ is syntactically enclosed, immediately dispels any nostalgic comfort in that it stresses what is at stake here: a relationship of power, i.e. a hierarchical relationship in which one party is dominated by and dependent on another. It is this prefigured power relationship that Hall tries to productively work against (premise 2).

In order not to be drawn into the discursive logic of Hall’s argumentation all too quickly and thereby prematurely give in to the discursive power order he sets out to resist, it may prove useful to create some distance by considering these premises and establish what connects them by way of a brief reference to a theorist Hall never actively engaged with (at least to my knowledge), Niklas Luhmann. Proceeding from the “basic assumption that social systems are only ever formed through communication” (2017: 120), Luhmann proposes that power “functions as a communication medium” (2017: 122).¹ Power, in other words, always presupposes a communication situation structured by selection processes. The point is that power does not necessarily curtail freedom but, in complex societies, rather thrives when both parties, the power-holder (*‘alter’*) and the one affected by power (*‘ego’*), are furnished with alternatives: “Power increases with freedom on *both* sides” (2017: 123; emphasis in the original). However, while options for differentiated action may theoretically be plentiful, the power-holder is capable of selecting what he or she communicates to such an extent as to regulate and reduce the ways in which the one affected may select on their part: “The function of a communication medium lies in transmitting reduced complexity. The selection made by *alter* limits *ego’s* possible selections by its being communicated under particular and specified conditions.” (2017: 124) Significantly, though, Luhmann warns against considering this process in terms of a simplistic cause-and-effect relationship that presupposes self-willed, ‘transcendental’ subjects who directly influence each other. Rather, as Christian Morgner and Michael King explain, “Luhmann’s systems theory is concerned with highly dynamic meaning-making in a complex world.” (2017: xi), which suggests that, in modern societies, it is not the individual who, on the basis of his or her

¹ Alternatively, this could have been done as well by reference to Hall’s own writings that deal with the mechanisms involved in communication processes, perhaps particularly “Encoding/Decoding” (1980) and “The Work of Representation” (1997).



will, ‘intentionally’ creates meaning, but “meaning determines meaning” (2017: xi).² This also holds true for the communication medium ‘power’. In Luhmann’s words, “power is to be understood only as a symbolically *generalized* communication medium” (2017: 125; emphasis in the original) whereby “[t]he function of power lies in the regulation of contingency.” (2017: 124) Importantly, the fact that every communication process inherently implies contingency on both sides, i.e. a constitutive openness and uncertainty, involves “the possibility of rejecting the selections on offer transmitted by the communication.” (2017: 120) It is this possibility to which Hall resorts here.

What Hall rejects, first of all, is the notion of a simplistic teleological process when it comes to historical becoming. With biting irony, he dismisses the vulgar-Romantic/idealistic idea of there being an original moment in which cultural studies “emerged full grown from the head” (1996a: 262); a quasi-magical event in which his ‘genius’ spontaneously and sympathetically had fused with that of Raymond Williams or Richard Hoggart. Instead, he asserts that it is “necessary to do some genealogical and archaeological work on the archive” (1996a: 262), a phrasing that undoubtedly references the work of Michel Foucault. In the present context, the term ‘genealogy’ is particularly relevant. As Foucault explains, it entails a dismissal of the methodological truths established by 19th-century historiography: “Genealogy [...] rejects the metahistorical deployment of ideal simplifications and indefinite teleologies. It opposes itself to the search for ‘origins.’” (2010b: 77) Any attempt at recovering and describing an absolute, ‘pure’, origin – a moment without history, yet a moment at which history begins – is always already made impossible by the ‘excess’ of speech, i.e. the fact that the language we employ to describe the origin inevitably carries in itself the traces of history, tainting the alleged purity (cf. 79). Hall’s endeavour in “Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies” is thus best described by way of Foucault’s (and Nietzsche’s) term ‘emergence’ (*Entstehung*; cf. Foucault 2010b: 83): just like other ‘fields of knowledge’, cultural studies emerged as the effect of a “series of subjugations”; it is the historically transient product of a highly differentiated and dynamic intersection of “forces” (83). Accordingly, the genealogical “isolation of different points of emergence does not conform to the successive configurations of an identical meaning; rather they result from substitutions, displacements, disguised conquests, and systematic reversals.” (86) Granted that Hall’s article is itself symptomatic of the dynamic struggle of forces that has effected the emergence of cultural studies as a field of knowledge, Hall cannot but dramatize what Foucault means by “systematic reversals” in that he shows how precarious the positions of the one who holds power and the one who is affected by it really are. In an act of re-interpretation (“That is to say [...]”, 1996a: 262), he moves from the role he refuses to accept, namely that of the authoritative doyen of cultural studies

² Such an anti-teleological logic, albeit explained from a different perspective, can also be found in the circular and non-binary ‘communication model’ devised by Paul du Gay, Stuart Hall *et al.* in *Doing Cultural Studies*, namely the so-called ‘circuit of culture’ (cf. du Gay *et al.* 2013: xxx-xxxi).



and holder of policing power, into a position of subordination: a position in which he is *subjected to* forces that he cannot control.

That is to say, I want to absolve myself of the many burdens of representation which people carry around – I carry around at least three: I'm expected to speak for the entire black race on all questions theoretical, critical, etc., and sometimes for British politics, as well as for cultural studies. This is what is known as the black person's burden, and I would like to absolve myself of it at this moment.

That means, paradoxically, speaking autobiographically. [...] [I]n order not to be authoritative, I've got to speak autobiographically. (Hall 1996a: 263)

Before returning to Hall's notion of the "black person's burden" and his attempt at self-absolution later, it is necessary to consider the notion of 'speaking autobiographically'. To draw upon this notion is undeniably both a clever 'liberating' move and a move doomed to failure; and of course, we are meant to understand that Hall is aware of this ambiguity. Having just renounced the essentialist closure pertaining to the notion of the independent free-willed subject, it is indeed somewhat paradoxical that he now attempts to re-evoke this very notion in order to retreat from the public domain to the allegedly safer ground of his private self and personal history from which to observe from a distance how, "[a]gain and again, the so-called unfolding of cultural studies was interrupted by a break, by real ruptures, by exterior forces" (1996a: 268). However, from what follows, it becomes clear that the autobiographical identity position he assumes is not one founded on a metaphysical concept of essentialised closure; rather, along the lines sketched in "Who Needs Identity?", it must be understood in terms of a 'strategic essentialism' that enables political agency (cf. Hall 1996f: 2). To be more precise, while we cannot help 'narrativising' our selves, "the necessarily fictional nature of this process in no way undermines its discursive, material or political effectivity" (Hall 1996f: 4). Hence, yes, identities "emerge within the play of specific modalities of power" (4). However, if power, according to Luhmann, inherently implies 'freedom', this space of ultimately uncontrollable performative 'iteration' also may be used for politically effective forms of 'rejection'.

Of the three ruptures Hall sketches in "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies", particularly the second is telling in this respect, namely the "intervention of feminism" (1996a: 269).³ In the late 1960s and 1970s, second-wave feminism questioned the residual Victorian division between the public and the private by "opening [...] the question of the personal as political" (269), which in turn had severe consequences for the understanding of power by the male-dominated scholarly community not just in academia generally, but also in the left-oriented, 'progressive' Birmingham Centre for

³ For critical negotiations of the way in which Hall positions himself here, cf. e.g. Bhabha 2015: 10-20 and Brunson 1996.



Contemporary Cultural Studies. Feminism “reorganized the field [...] [by way of a] radical expansion of the notion of power, which had hitherto been very much developed within the framework of the notion of the public, the public domain, with the effect that we could not use the term power – so key to the earlier problematic of hegemony – in the same way.” (269) Especially when it came to grasping how the traditional mechanisms of canon formation had denied women a voice and hence the right to representation, amongst other places, in scholarly discourse – even within that allegedly anti-traditional type of discourse which had been evolving within the CCCS – Hall, as he recalls, “really discovered about the gendered nature of power. Long, long after I was able to pronounce the words, I encountered the reality of Foucault’s profound insight into the individual reciprocity of knowledge and power. Talking about giving up power is a radically different experience from being silenced.” (269-70)

In the following, the “problematic of hegemony” will be taken up again. This will be done by offering a selection of quotations from Hall or, respectively, the co-authors of *Policing the Crisis*, which will both help to illuminate his take on power and honour his voice, his power of ‘speaking out’.

The Conjunctural Analysis of Hegemonic Power

Stuart Hall’s most extensive study is *Policing the Crisis*, a collaborative work with Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, and Brian Roberts. To put it very crudely, this bulky volume shows how the phenomenon of ‘mugging’ as it emerged in the Britain of the early 1970s was a phenomenon whose status within and meaning for society could only be established if understood as the result of a historically specific ‘conjuncture’ of various discourses (crime, race, class, youth, gender etc.) that had evolved on different, yet interconnected, structural levels (ideological, political, social, economic, cultural), whereby institutions like the media, the police, and the judiciary had assumed a crucial and formative role. While being unable to do justice to the complexity of *Policing the Crisis* here and hence risking distortion and simplification, I would still like to selectively draw attention to a few aspects that help to shed light on Hall’s use of the concept of power.⁴ In the first chapter of Part III, “Crime, Law and the State”, the authors ponder whether the concept of a “societal control culture”, as introduced by the sociologist E. M. Lemert, is helpful to explain how “different apparatuses of control” (Hall et al. 2013: 192) – police, judiciary, media – cohere in order to define, identify, and systematically regulate ‘deviancy’. The ‘control-culture approach’, they argue, is valuable in that it deals, for instance, with “the question of who has the power to label whom” and reflects

⁴ For a more extended critical appraisal of *Policing the Crisis*, cf. the article by Jürgen Kramer in this issue of *Coils of the Serpent*.



“the massively skewed distribution of power between law-makers and law-breakers” (192). On the other hand, however, it is not sufficient because while “[i]t identifies centres of power and their importance for the social-control process; [...] it does not locate them *historically*, and thus it cannot designate the significant moments of shift and change.” (193; emphasis in the original) The workings of power, then, can neither be identified in abstract, universalising and purely theoretical nor in solely synchronic ways; the nature of power only reveals itself in its historical specificity. This, incidentally, might be reason enough for Hall not to foreground ‘power’ as one of the concepts that dominated his thought: maybe there is no such thing as power, but only *powers* in the plural.

Instead of ‘power’, Hall and his co-authors prefer what may with some justice be accepted as an alternative term, or at least as a term that refers to a specific way in which power can be conceptualised historically: hegemony. In itself, the extensive usage of the concept of hegemony not only indicates that Hall and others who were part of the so-called New Left saw themselves in a Marxist tradition of thinking, but, more specifically, that they considered it a necessity to question orthodox Marxist positions in order to develop a more timely reading, or “re-reading”, of the Marxist canon.⁵ This is so because, for Hall, the most important theorist of hegemony was also a writer via whose work an innovative re-thinking of Marxism had become possible: the Italian Antonio Gramsci (cf. e.g. Hall 1996b: 412). One particularly pertinent aspect in Gramsci’s writings was the fact that, while he held fast to Marx and Engels’ historical materialism, he rejected ‘economism’. This term refers to the reductionist belief that the economy as the material ‘base’ (material goods, means of production, labourers etc.), in a rather straightforward one-to-one relationship, ‘determines’ the ‘realities’, norms and ideas (ideologies) that regulate the wider social and political spheres (‘superstructure’). Economism, according to Gramsci (cf. 1971: 163), takes too little account of the specific historical processes through which different classes and class interests developed distinctively in specific times and places. While historical change is not denied in the orthodox view, of course, it is very narrowly seen as dependent on paradigmatic technological changes in the sphere of production. In addition, the agents who make the ‘system’ work are clearly identifiable in all-too general binary terms (self-interested owners of the means of production versus workers who are exploited by them). As Hall summarises: “[Economism] reduces everything in a social formation to the economic level, and conceptualizes all other types of social relations as directly and immediately ‘corresponding’ to the economic.” (1996b: 417f) Conversely, of course, the criticism of economist reductionism does not point toward abolishing the formative role of the economy in Hall’s re-reading.

⁵ Consider for example his “re-reading” (Hall 1996d: 40) of Marx’s famous “Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham” passage in the first volume of *Capital*, at the very end of the chapter on “The Sale and Purchase of Labour-Power” (cf. Marx 1976: 280).



On the contrary, as the authors of *Policing the Crisis* aver, “[i]t is the legal and political aspects of the *capitalist* state which principally concern us here” (Hall et al. 2013: 198; my emphasis, G.S.). By way of an historically oriented approach, then, the authors deal with the specific organisation of the state as it gradually began to develop in Western modernity from about 1500, but particularly after the rise and consolidation of industrial capitalism, i.e. from the late 18th and during the 19th and 20th centuries. To be more precise, the term capitalism refers to a historically specific mode of production that is based on the notion of ‘free labour’ (cf. 198-99), which in turn can only gain ground by way of the concomitant advancement of a ‘liberal’ notion of a ‘civil society’ that does not simply complement but actually grounds the state.⁶ Enabled, amongst other things, by the assertion of the notion of a universal right to property and the structural changes in the wake of industrialisation, such a society is always also a “society of generalised commodity exchange” in which “each individual appears as ‘mutually indifferent’ to the other’s interest” (199). Tellingly, then, since the authors of *Policing the Crisis* characterise the modern state as a state “*under capitalism*” (198; emphasis in the original), they obviously suggest that the economic discourse is considered as retaining its determining primacy with regard to the social and the political. However, at the same time, taking their cue from Gramsci, they divert from the orthodox Marxist route in that they, to quote from one of Hall’s articles, assume “a different conception of ‘determinacy’ from that which is entailed by the normal sense of ‘economic determinism’” (Hall 1996d: 44). Rather, they claim, our social practices are the effect of a set of interrelating discourses on different structural levels that mutually determine each other, which, however, never leads to ‘closure’ in a unidirectional manner.⁷

With respect to his analysis of the situation in Italy in the 1920s and early 1930s, Gramsci suggested that in order to specify “the ‘relation of forces’” within a society (or, with Gramsci, particularly within a nation-state), “various moments or levels must be distinguished” (1971: 180), namely the social, political and military levels (cf. 180-85). A society is stable as long as “the hegemony of a fundamental social group over a series of subordinate groups” (182) can be upheld. Significantly, though, this is not done so much by coercion as by the production of consent, which the authors of *Policing the Crisis* explicitly characterise as two complementary “types of power” (Hall et al. 2013: 200) exercised by the capitalist state. In other words, the capitalist state only resorts to coercion, for example in the form of increased policing, in times of crisis, while it

⁶ In political philosophy, the so-called ‘contract theory’ was especially influential in this regard, as developed by writers like John Locke or Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

⁷ It must be stressed that, for Hall, the ‘structuralist’ approach is only one of the two ‘determining’ paradigms of cultural studies. The other is the ‘culturalist’ paradigm in the tradition of Raymond Williams and E. P. Thompson, a paradigm that “conceptualizes culture as interwoven with all social practices; and those practices, in turn, as a common form of human activity: sensuous human praxis, the activity through which men and women make history.” (1986: 39)



“function[s] best when it operate[s] ‘normally’ through leadership and consent” (200), that is, when the subordinate groups find themselves in accord with the ideology and policies of the dominant group. In Gramsci’s words: “Undoubtedly the fact of hegemony presupposes that account be taken of the interests and the tendencies of the groups over which hegemony is to be exercised, and that a certain compromise equilibrium should be formed – in other words, that the leading group should make sacrifices of an economic-corporate kind.” (Gramsci 1971: 161) Such sacrifices, however, are not enough in themselves. In order to establish “cohesion” (Hall et al. 2013: 202), “[t]he conditions for capitalist production and the reproduction of its social relations must be articulated through *all* levels of the social formation – economic, political, ideological.” (199) The capitalist state, above all, then, is an “*organiser*” (203; emphasis in the original) that sees to the proper interaction of these levels, particularly by way of the legal system and the “cultural apparatuses” (199) at work in civil society. The latter regulate, amongst other things, the educational discourse as well as “the sphere of consumption of the family” (199), for instance by upholding specific ideological notions pertaining to the sexual division of labour. To repeat, according to this conception, the economy retains its formative role, yet it (whatever this anthropomorphised economy ‘is’) does so by disguising especially its pertinence to class divisions, instead allowing other discursive formations to step into the foreground and occupy centre stage:

One effect of erecting a complex of state apparatuses in this way is to render the economic aspect of class relations invisible. The classes are represented, politically, as if composed only of ‘individual citizens’. The relation of citizens to the state is defined in the law (legal subjects) and through the political institutions (political subjects). The state represents itself as the repository of all these individual wills – it is the ‘general will’, while standing above and apart from the sordid struggle between particular interests. It reconstitutes class subjects as *its own* subjects: itself as ‘the nation’. The political-juridical domain establishes the central points of reference for other public ideologies. (Hall et al. 2013: 203; emphasis in the original)

Following Gramsci, Hall and his co-authors claim that the post-war Britain of the 1950s was indeed a time in which a compromise equilibrium along these lines was achieved and hence hegemony secured. The establishment of the welfare state was part of these hegemonic strategies in that it was a means both to expand the state and make sure that the working classes “were to be at one and the same moment *enfranchised* (in the enlarged sense, socially as well as politically) *and contained*.” (209; emphasis in the original) The reference to such an enfranchisement-cum-containment strategy illustrates that hierarchical power relations do not disappear, of course, as soon as a compromise equilibrium is accomplished; the achievement of a compromise equilibrium is not the ‘end of history’; the post-war consensus did not herald an era of ‘true’ equality. In fact, “[t]he suggestion is not that power has been effectively dispersed in modern democratic mass societies but that the vast majority of people are united within a



common system of values, goals and beliefs – the so-called ‘central value system’; and it is this *consensus on values*, rather than formal representation, which provides the cohesion which such complex modern states require.” (212; emphasis in the original) In other words, by way of *naturalising* a specific value system, by way of creating a *common sense*, “domination not only seems to be universal (what everybody wants) and legitimate (not won by coercive force), but its basis in exploitation actually *disappears from view*.” (213; emphasis in the original) If we take this notion of a “central value system” to be synonymous with ‘ideology’, it may be added that Hall, as part of a definition of the latter term, stresses that “[i]t has especially to do with the concepts and the languages of practical thought which stabilize a particular form of power and domination.” (1996d: 27) The notions of hegemony and power are hence closely intertwined. Hegemony refers to that sort of power that permeates a whole society through the activation of different discursive levels (economic, social, political, ideological) in order to stabilise a specific hierarchical ensemble by serving the interconnected interests of particular dominant groups in a temporally and spatially contingent situation.

In an early article, “A Sense of Classlessness” (published in 1958 [2017c]), Hall had already pondered the question of whether working-class solidarity was breaking up and hence the class vanishing – due to urbanisation, the participation of the working classes in post-war affluence (workers becoming individualised consumers, owning their own houses, TVs, cars etc.), and the growth of technological industries as rivals of the traditional manufacturing industries. However, the idea that the working classes were gradually turning into empowered middle-class consumers was, he argued, not proof of the coming of a classless society, but rather of a shift in capitalism’s own adaptation strategies, with the workers still being “‘proletarianised’ – [yet] not, as Marx thought *downwards* towards minimum wage levels, but *upwards* towards roughly middle-class styles of living.” (2017c: 41) And indeed, from the late 1950s, the “affluent consensus” (Hall *et al.* 2013: 231) broke up; the equilibrium was more and more disturbed and destabilised, and a crisis of hegemony developed that came to a climax in the 1970s, with the ‘mugging panic’ standing out as one of its symptoms. It is in this regard that Gramsci’s insights prove especially influential for the argument put forth in *Policing the Crisis*. He writes:

A crisis occurs, sometimes lasting for decades. This exceptional duration means that incurable structural contradictions have revealed themselves [...], and that, despite this, the political forces which are struggling to conserve and defend the existing structure itself are making every effort to cure them, within certain limits, and to overcome them. These incessant and persistent efforts [...] form the terrain of the “conjunctural”, and it is upon this terrain that the forces of opposition organise. (Gramsci 1971: 178)



What happens in times of crisis, then, is that the invisibility of the hegemonic power hierarchies fades. In order to counter this “process of ‘unmasking’” (Hall *et al.* 2013: 214), the dominant groups will indeed make “every effort to cure” the cause of the rupture, yet can only do so by modifying “the *modes of hegemony*; and one of the principal ways in which this is registered is in terms of a tilt in the operation of the state away from consent towards the pole of coercion”, that is, by “the powerful orchestration [...] of an *authoritarian consensus*” (Hall *et al.* 2013: 214; emphases in the original).

Much of Hall’s work was concerned with the analysis of such contemporary and politically pressing conjunctures – the early 1970s in *Policing the Crisis*, the Thatcherite years (cf. Hall 1988a and 1988b), New Labour (cf. Hall 2003), the situation after the banking crisis of 2008/9 (cf. Hall, Massey and Rustin 2015). In a conversation with Doreen Massey, he defined ‘conjuncture’ as follows:

A conjuncture is a period during which the different social, political, economic and ideological contradictions that are at work in society come together to give it a specific and distinctive shape. [...] A conjuncture can be long or short: it’s not defined by time or by simple things like a change of regime – though these have their own effects. As I see it, history moves from one conjuncture to another rather than being an evolutionary flow. And what drives it forward is usually a crisis, when the contradictions that are always at play in any historical moment are condensed, or, as Althusser said, ‘fuse in a ruptural unity’. Crises are moments of potential change, but the nature of their resolution is not given. (Massey and Hall 2010: 57)

The term ‘Thatcherism’, for example, refers to such a conjuncture in that it stands for the re-establishment of consensus after the crisis of the 1960s and 1970s. Evidently, there is not enough space here to refer to Hall’s renowned analyses of Thatcherism in any detail. However, a brief discussion is certainly in order for a better understanding of Hall’s conception of hegemonic power.

When it comes to the power relationships that structure modern societies, Hall argues, it would be too simplistic to assume that either the ‘dominant’ or the ‘subordinate’ groups, which are commonly referred to by him by way of the term ‘class’, naturally cohered both internally and amongst each other by identifying with one circumscribed set of ‘ruling ideas’ (as in orthodox Marxist conceptions): “we find instead significant differences of ideological formation *within* the so-called dominant classes, with no perfect or consistent class symmetry in the way these ideological formations are distributed among classes.” (1988b: 41) Thatcherism managed to achieve a new consensus by way of what Hall, in “The Great Moving Right Show” (1979 [2017b]) and other articles, termed “authoritarian populism” (Hall 2017b: 174; Hall 1988b: 41).⁸

⁸ By way of a “balancing act’, its two step-shuffle” (Hall 2003: 19), New Labour later adapted itself to Thatcherite positions by disavowing specific traditional Labour positions and transforming “social



However, regarding the question of why the Thatcherite ideology could become so popular across class divisions in the late 1970s and during the 1980s, “especially among those sectors of the society whose interests it cannot possibly be said to represent in any conventional sense of the term” (1988b: 41), Hall vehemently speaks out against the orthodox Marxist conception of a ‘false consciousness’ on the grounds that it implies the existence of a specific essential ‘truth’ which most of the members of the subordinated classes are allegedly unable to see; instead, they are easily ‘duped’ by those in power to accept an alternative, but false, truth (cf. 43f). Accordingly, any all too unidirectional top-down approach to power needs to be considered with scepticism. Negotiating Althusser’s conception of ideological state apparatuses, Hall insists that “[w]hat is striking about Thatcherism is precisely its capacity to enter into struggle and win space in *civil society itself* [...] *before* [...] taking formal power *in* the state, as part of an internal contestation against key elements within the power bloc.” (1988b: 47; emphases in the original)

Power, Hegemony, Discourse

In the following, I would like to take a passage from Hall’s article “The Toad in the Garden: Thatcher among the Theorists” as a starting point from which to summarise what has already been established about Hall’s conception of power in the previous section but also add a few more aspects (particularly aspect 4). The passage in question is particularly useful in that it combines notions Hall took up from both Antonio Gramsci and Michel Foucault, whose thoughts, arguably, had the greatest influence on his own conceptualisation of power.⁹ Here it is:

As this analysis of Thatcherism clearly shows, the discursive relations of power cannot be constituted exclusively on the terrain of the state. They precisely crisscross the social body. There is no moment in which the powers that cohere in the state can ever exhaustively resume those that are dispersed through the plurality of practices in society. Nevertheless, the moment of the passage of power into the state and its condensation there into a definite system of rule is a critical historical moment, representing a distinct phase. Of course, no sovereign unity of discourse then unfolds: the moment of “state,” like that of “party,” is not a final one, as conceived in classical political theory. Thatcherism, as a discursive formation,

democracy into a *particular variant* of free-market neo-liberalism.” (2003: 12) As the joint paper by the then German chancellor Gerhard Schröder and PM Tony Blair, *Europe: The Third Way* (1999), suggested, the move of social democracy towards centre/right positions was a conjunctural phenomenon that transcended the boundaries of the nation-state.

⁹ In a more extended text, it would have been necessary to take into account at least three other formative thinkers, namely Louis Althusser, Nicos Poulantzas, and Edward Said. Considering that Poulantzas himself, as Hall explains in his introduction to Verso’s Radical Thinkers edition of *State, Power, Socialism*, wrestled with both Althusser and Foucault, an examination of Poulantzas’ influence on Hall would surely yield interesting results (cf. Hall 2014).



has remained a plurality of discourses – about the family, the economy, national identity, morality, crime, law, women, human nature. (1988b: 53)

What can this passage tell us about Hall's conception(s) of power?

1) Power is historically contingent. In order to understand its workings, considering the way in which different discursive strands intersect at one “critical historical moment” is unavoidable. This is what theorist of power Heinrich Popitz identifies as the most fundamental – historically oriented – premise of any conceptualisation and analysis of power phenomena: “power-based orders [are] [...] humanly *produced* realities. [...] In the same way as they have been brought into being, they can also be refashioned.” (2017: 2; emphasis in the original) However, looking at the historical constitutedness of power involves neither a search for a mythical ‘origin’ nor the establishment of unbroken continuities. As Hall stated in his conversation with Doreen Massey, he rejects the view of history as an “evolutionary flow” (Massey and Hall 2010: 57) but rather subscribes to a conjunctural analysis that looks at discontinuities. In this respect, Foucault's discourse theory was surely as formative for Hall's thinking as was Gramsci's conception of hegemony. As Foucault writes in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*: “Discourse must not be referred to the distant presence of the origin, but treated as when it occurs.” (2010a: 25)

2) ‘Power’ is not reducible to the state. Rather, powers – always in the plural – are “dispersed through the plurality of practices in society.” To refer to Popitz once more, this has historical reasons as well: the ‘ubiquity of power’ (cf. 2017: 4) in modern ‘Western’ societies is the result of the bourgeois revolutions in the 18th and 19th centuries: “power is now perceived as the property of society itself.” (4) This implies that while “[t]he bourgeois configuration of societal powers does not disempower the state[,] [...] ‘the’ power is no longer concentrated within political institutions. Tensions arising from power conflicts pervade the whole society.” (5) In Gramscian terms, these tensions become tangible as soon as a previously achieved compromise equilibrium begins to crack; this is also the moment in which the hitherto naturalised and hence ‘invisible’ concentration of powers with the dominant groups in society becomes visible and hence reveals its ‘constructedness’. In the present instance, though, Hall formulates in explicitly Foucauldian terms: “Thatcherism, as a discursive formation, has remained a plurality of discourses”. According to Foucault, a ‘discursive formation’ can be detected as soon as it is possible to allocate a “number of statements” to “a system of dispersion”, i.e. “whenever, between objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (an order, correlations, positions and functionings, transformations).” (2010a: 38)¹⁰ This is exactly what the authors of *Policing the Crisis*

¹⁰ This might be a good point to mention that, while obviously profiting from Foucault's insights a lot, Hall also repeatedly pointed out what he thought was lacking in the French theorist's approach. One example



did when they looked at the way in which ‘statements’ concerning ‘mugging’ were dispersed over various institutional domains in the early 1970s, namely the news media, the judiciary, the police and the political establishment. What has been achieved in *Policing the Crisis*, then, is a description of the way in which a specific group of statements about mugging as part of the discourse on crime, in spite and because of their dispersal, referred to and overlapped with other discourses – “the family, the economy, national identity, morality, crime, law, women, human nature” (Hall 1988b: 53), but also, and maybe predominantly, race – in such a way as to “organize themselves into a single figure, converge with institutions and practices, and carry meanings that may be common to a whole period” (Foucault 2010a: 118) One of the decisive principles underlying discursive power, accordingly, is that of “rarefaction” (what Luhmann calls ‘selection’), i.e. its effectiveness depends on limiting what can be said: “The discursive formation is not therefore a developing totality [...] it is a distribution of gaps, voids, absences, limits, divisions.” (119) While power, as has just been argued, is not *reducible* to the state, it should nonetheless be kept in mind that the state, in virtually all of Hall’s writings, remains an ineluctable point of reference when it comes to the identification of power relationships.

3) ‘Power’ can never be located for good, can never be permanently fixed, which does not mean that it is place-less. Hall’s use of terms like “social body” and “social practices”¹¹ stresses the materiality of power, its performative nature, and its ‘organic’ qualities, which in turn suggests that power always involves *spatialisation*. As Byung-Chul Han avers in *Was ist Macht? (What Is Power?)*, with spatial conceptions of power, in contrast to linear/temporal conceptions, “power [...] does not operate as a cause that effects a specific action on the part of the one subjected to power. Rather, it opens a *space* in which an action receives a direction in the first place, i.e. a *meaning*, a *space*,

of such criticism can be found shortly after the passage in “The Toad in the Garden” I am currently discussing: “The problem with Foucault, to put it brusquely, is a conception of difference without a conception of articulation, that is, a conception of power without a conception of hegemony.” (1988b: 53) Taking into account the definitions of ‘discourse’ I have just quoted from *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, it is questionable whether Hall’s assessment is quite to the point in this case. Arguably, Foucault’s suggestions regarding the systematic dispersion of certain statements may well be reconciled with Hall’s notion of articulation. If seen as strategic moves within a Gramscian ‘war of position’, however, the ratio behind his critical statements becomes evident. In order to secure the *political* and *social validity* and *viability* of theory, i.e., to make sure that 1) meaningful statements can still be made and 2) that they can thus be uttered from and on behalf of specific subject positions (by way of what may be termed ‘strategic essentialism’), he must write against certain variants of poststructuralist thinking that insist on the never-ending deferral of meaning and/or the total erosion of (political) subjectivity and hence foreclose the possibility of politics (for instance, the US-American ‘school’ of deconstruction). Such argumentative thrust also becomes obvious e.g. in Hall’s critique of Foucault’s conception of the body in “Who Needs Identity?”: “[...] since the decentring of the subject is not the destruction of the subject, and since the ‘centring’ of discursive practice cannot work without the constitution of subjects, the theoretical work cannot be fully accomplished without complementing the account of discursive and disciplinary regulation with an account of the practices of subjective self-constitution.” (1996f: 13)

¹¹ In this regard, it is surely helpful to again consider the dialectic interplay between the ‘culturalist’ and ‘structuralist’ paradigms of cultural studies (cf. footnote 7).



then, that precedes the *line* of causality or chain of action.” (2005: 29)¹² Hence, social practices, even if they happen in an apparently spontaneous way, do not spring from thin air but have ‘grown organically’. In order to do so, they first need a ‘space’ that enables them to be performed; a space, however, that has always already been delimited by power.

4) Power is productive of truth. In *Discipline and Punish* and elsewhere, Foucault has demonstrated how the disciplinary power of modern societies finds its most condensed expression in the enclosed spaces of the army barracks, the prison, the school, or the asylum. At the same time, he also took great pains to explain that the view of disciplinary power as repressive is a reductive misconception. Instead, he insisted that power is *productive*: “We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it ‘excludes’, it ‘represses’, it ‘censors’, it ‘abstracts’, it ‘masks’, it ‘conceals’. In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth.” (Foucault 1995: 194) Interestingly, in the only article by Hall that carries the term ‘power’ in its title, “The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power”, contained in the Open University volume *Formations of Modernity* and hence didactically aimed at students and the general reading public, he chose to explain power exclusively by way of Foucault. He here puts an emphasis on Foucault’s insight that knowledge of the world is produced by power. Accordingly, there is nothing like an essential, a-historical, truth that knowledge would ever be able to access. Conversely, this is not to say that all knowledge would therefore be ‘subjective’ or even ‘false’. On the contrary, discursive power formations create the regulatory framework for ‘objectivity’, yet in a decidedly contingent form; in other words, they *enable* the enunciation of statements that are ‘objectively true’ *within* such frameworks (cf. e.g. Foucault 1980: 133). At the same time, knowledge has the effect of stabilising certain hierarchical power relationships, an insight which also modifies our understanding of subjectivity. In Hall’s words:

The knowledge which a discourse produces constitutes a kind of power, exercised over those who are ‘known’. When that knowledge is exercised in practice, those who are ‘known’ in a particular way will be subject (i.e. subjected) to it. This is always a power-relation. [...] Those who produce the discourse also have the power to *make it true* – i.e. to enforce its validity, its scientific status. (Hall 1992: 294f)

As Hall points out via Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism, Foucault’s insights are particularly helpful when it comes to understanding the nature of colonial and imperial, but also postcolonial, relationships in that they make it possible to explain the way in

¹² My translation, G.S.; the original reads: “Die Macht wirkt [...] nicht als eine Ursache, die beim Machtunterworfenen eine bestimmte Handlung bewirkt. Vielmehr eröffnet sie einen *Raum*, in dem eine Handlung erst eine Richtung, d.h. einen *Sinn* erhält, einen *Raum* also, der der *Linie* der Kausalität oder Handlungskette vorausgeht.”



which the creation of ideological binaries like ‘the West and the rest’ have underpinned and ‘justified’ systems of domination and subjection.

Hall and the ‘Black Man’s Burden’

This offers the chance to come back to the issue of the “black man’s burden” which Hall, at the beginning of “Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies”, tries to absolve himself from. It also offers the chance to point out, in an inexcusably brief manner, that much of Stuart Hall’s thinking about power related to questions regarding ‘race’, racism and ethnicity, be it in the last part of *Policing the Crisis*, his enormously influential essay on “New Ethnicities” (1996c), in many other of his articles, for example “When Was ‘The Postcolonial?’” (1996e) and “The Multi-Cultural Question” (2000), or, finally, in the posthumously published autobiography, *Familiar Stranger* (2017a).

In the first chapter of *Familiar Stranger*, reflecting on his experience of growing up in colonial Jamaica, Hall explains that

recognizing myself as a colonized subject meant accepting my insertion into History (capital ‘H’), all right – only backwards, upside-down, by negation. [...] So for my generation of Jamaicans, ‘colonial’ was not something you chose to be. It was an attribute of being, formative because it framed your very existence. As Michel Foucault suggested, it positioned you as a subject-‘author’ as well as subjecting you to its discourse. (2017a: 21).

It is for this reason that Hall’s desire to absolve himself of the burden of representation – of having “to speak for the entire black race on all questions theoretical, critical, etc.” – seems to be foreclosed. As he remarks after having cursorily sketched his professional career from when he wanted to become a poet in his boyhood days to his later days as a ‘theorist’ of great standing: “There was never a single moment in this trajectory which wasn’t impelled by my racial positioning” (2017a: 14), a positioning which always also implied an experience of displacement, not only in Jamaica but perhaps even more so during his adult life in London, and here also through his professional personae as academic, teacher, intellectual and cultural theorist. In his epilogue to a conference volume dedicated to him, honouring his contributions on *Culture, Politics, Race and Diaspora*, Hall writes: “I keep looking around trying to discover this person ‘Stuart Hall’ that everybody is talking about. Occasionally I recognize him, I sort of know him. He has a certain familiarity every now and again.” (2007: 269) While this is somewhat tongue-in-cheek, it is not entirely so. What he here sketches is the ‘familiar stranger’ that is the object of his autobiography. “[S]peaking autobiographically”, therefore, as a possible escape from the “burden of representation”, is riddled with problems. It cannot refer to a simple return to the snug closure of the self-willed Enlightenment subject, the return to



an essentialised conception of identity. This is so because “identities are, as it were, the positions which the subject is obliged to take up while always ‘knowing’ [...] that they are representations” (1996f: 6). Hence, granted we accept that identities are themselves forms of representation, this implies that, since “representation is always constructed across a ‘lack’, across a division, from the place of the Other, [they] thus can never be adequate – identical – to the subject processes which are invested in them.” (1996f: 6) This is even more so for the ‘doubly-inscribed’ postcolonial subject or, particularly with a view to the situation of refugees today, the migrant subject, not least in times when the discursively dominant Western liberal conception of the Enlightenment subject has a hard time continuing to assert its universality (cf. Hall 1996e: 252).

Hence, Hall’s desire for absolution, precisely because of the impossibility of returning to an essentialised (‘Western’) version of selfhood, may actually be read as a strategic move in a Gramscian ‘war of position’ (cf. Gramsci 1971: 229-39; Hall 1996b: 426-27; Hall 1996d: 42). As Avtar Brah suggests, “[Hall’s] is a diasporic imagination” – and hence position – “first and foremost because it is nurtured by an open mind that continuously decentres any desire for fixity” (2007: 81). Taking his cue from Jacques Derrida, concepts like ‘identity’ can only retain their value if used ‘under erasure’; since there are no alternatives to them as yet, “there is nothing to do but to continue to think with them – albeit now in their detotalized or deconstructed form” (1996f: 1; cf. also Hall 1996e: 255) With regard to spaces of power, such detotalising, strategic moves also imply that “[n]o site, either ‘there’ or ‘here’, in its fantasied autonomy and in-difference, could develop without taking into account its significant and/or abjected others” (1996e: 252). If power hence refers to the mechanism through which the ‘self’ stabilises itself by producing abject others, ‘absolution’ means freeing the self from itself by acknowledging the constitutive role of the other. With respect to its religious overtones, it also implies the dismissal of an essentialising metaphysics of power (cf. Han 2005: 65-90). After all, Hall desires absolution in order “to take a position in relation to the ‘grand narrative’ of cultural studies” (Hall 1996a: 262); at other times he takes a similar position in relation to other metanarratives, for instance that of British imperialism. Such ruptures in the logic of power, however, as Hall concedes, can only ever be momentary (“at this moment”, Hall 1996a: 262).

What is crucial, then, in order to come back to the discussion we set out upon, is Hall’s insistence – in this moment – on “*speaking* autobiographically” (my emphasis, G.S.), performing an act of enunciation, while at the same time opening up a communication situation (“I’m going to tell you [...]”) that allows decentring the subject towards its constitutive others. As Homi Bhabha has claimed with a view to Hall’s conception of ‘new ethnicities’: “The supple doubleness of enunciation makes possible a critical perspective with a split address. The dialogic moment aligns the subject on the inside in the act of interlocutory communication; the enunciative moment embeds the



subject *as object* in the encompassing area of intersubjectivity” (2015: 26). The very fact that *Policing the Crisis* became a collaborative work, disallowing the identification of distinct, individualised ‘author-subjects’, hence, is representative of Hall’s ‘war of position’ against constricting power discourses. As such, even formally, *Policing the Crisis* was a political endeavour from the outset.¹³ At the same time, as Grant Farred writes in his obituary, Hall’s “voice retains its distinctness”; it could become “a pedagogical political weapon and the instrument of intellectual instruction because of the ways in which he registered how his thought was shaped in and through conversation with others.” (2017: 13) In this sense, the last words on Hall’s conception of power must belong to Stuart Hall himself:

I do think it is a requirement of intellectuals to speak a kind of truth. Maybe not truth with a capital T, but anyway, some kind of truth, the best truth they know or can discover – to speak that truth to power. To take responsibility – which can be unpleasant and is no recipe for success – for having spoken it. To take responsibility for speaking it to wider groups of people than are simply involved in the professional life of ideas. To speak it beyond the confines of the academy. To speak it, however, in its full complexity. (2007: 289)

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¹³ In this sense, *Policing the Crisis* was a statement against the neo-liberalisation of the academy itself, particularly the humanities and social sciences, a development that, unfortunately, could not be stopped but has gained in intensity in the first decades of the 21st century (keywords ‘third-party funding’, ‘impact’ etc.). As John Clarke recently wrote about *Policing the Crisis*: “the current dominant forms of the academy run in exactly the opposite direction [when compared to the direction *Policing the Crisis* took]. They fetishise individual work, individual careers and individual outputs. In particular, they fetishise the heroic great scholar. [...] In contrast, I think conjunctural analysis is one of those processes that is collaborative. I do not wish to fetishise or romanticise *Policing the Crisis*, but its attempt at conjunctural analysis relied on collective labour (and constant argument, discussion and revision).” (84)



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