



Dirty, Messy Business: Stuart Hall, Politics and the Political

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In the past decades, political theory and philosophy have seen the canonization of a new conceptual difference, whose roots have been traced back to a number of thinkers, but whose main theoretical elaboration can be said to have begun with the *Centre de recherches philosophiques sur le politique* founded by Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe in 1980 and closed in 1984: the difference between *la politique* and *le politique*, or between ‘politics’ and ‘the political’. As Chantal Mouffe (2005a: 8f), borrowing Heidegger’s vocabulary, has pointed out, the two terms operate on different levels: whereas ‘politics’ refers to the ‘ontic’ level and designates the empirical ‘facts’ of political organization – practices, institutions, discourses, etc. – ‘the political’ implies a philosophical inquiry at the ‘ontological’ level, asking, as Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy (1981: 12) put it, about the ‘essence of the political’. While, in theorists as diverse as Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière, Slavoj Žižek, Claude Lefort, Roberto Esposito, Ernesto Laclau, and many others – most of them located on the political left – this inquiry has yielded very different results, they all agree on the basic necessity to make this distinction between conventional politics, on the one hand, and a more profound dimension concerning the institution of the social itself, on the other. Similarly, virtually all the thinkers mentioned are in agreement as to the state of the political in the contemporary world: they all see it as in danger of being ignored, repressed or neutralized in the context of what they criticize as increasingly ‘post-political’ and ‘post-democratic’ social arrangements.

This critique of today’s post-politics is a powerful and important one. In the following, I want to argue that the work of Stuart Hall to some extent shares in – in fact, *anticipates*, since most of the relevant theories were developed after 1989 – this critical discourse. More specifically, I will

- 1) bring out and discuss Hall’s critique of post-politics;
- 2) elaborate upon his own understanding of the political, which is implicit in this critique and elsewhere in his writings – I will argue that Hall’s thought can be considered as belonging to what the sociologist Oliver Marchart (2010) has termed ‘the



moment of the political', insofar as it is a product of and response to our 'post-foundational condition', emphasizing as it does conflictuality, contingency and the groundlessness of society;

3) and finally, building on this, I will briefly talk about the conclusions concerning (ontic) politics that the post-foundationalism Hall shares with most of the other theorists I have mentioned leads him to, which are very different from those arrived at by philosophers such as Badiou, Rancière or Žižek and closer – partly via the shared engagement with Gramsci – to those of Mouffe and Laclau or Lefort.

The Politics of Man-Management

Much of what may be read as Hall's critique of post-political tendencies can be found in the New Left's *May Day Manifesto* – a text that, I feel, has regrettably and undeservedly been somewhat forgotten¹ – and in the Cultural Studies-classic *Policing the Crisis*, to both of which Hall was a leading contributor.² Like practically all of Hall's texts, both works, published in 1967/1968 and 1978 respectively, put forth analyses and arguments that are 'conjunctural' and thus rigorously contextual, written as critical political interventions in the context of a very specific social formation – British society – in an equally specific historical conjuncture – the post-war consensus and its mounting crisis. At the same time, as I intend to show, many of the issues raised in the two texts to some extent anticipate the debates about the post-political that would only fully come into their own in the years after 1989.

The *May Day Manifesto*, whose first edition was edited by Hall, Edward Thompson and Raymond Williams, is not only, in the authors' words, "a public statement and challenge" (Williams 1968: 11), making the case for a renewed socialism, but also a comprehensive analysis of British society in the 1960s in its social, economic, political, and cultural dimensions.³ An important part of this is the authors' account of the state of the political system and culture. They draw attention to various ways through which the *Systemfrage*, which should have arisen in the face of an increasing number of cracks in the harmonious façade of the corporatist consensus, is continuously deflected and the status quo thus stabilized. In fact, their manifesto, with its declared aim to present a

¹ This essay is also intended as a kind of recovery of some of the neglected theoretical treasures to be found in this text.

² When, in the following, I only mention Hall by name when referring to these and other texts and not his co-authors, this is done purely for pragmatic reasons (i.e., in order to avoid rather long lists of names). It is not in any way meant to diminish the contributions of the latter or to claim for Hall a special role in the composition of the text in question.

³ The interweaving of these various levels and the movement – "in a widening analysis and description" (Williams 1968: 18) – from the social realities of the everyday to international economics and politics, and their interconnection, already points to the particular mode of investigation employed in *Policing the Crisis* (on this subject, cf. the contribution of Jürgen Kramer in this issue).



totalizing description of the British realities, is explicitly intended to counteract one of these strategies, namely the “willed separation of issues, and the resulting fragmentation of consciousness” (Williams 1968: 15), which means that the connections that exist between the numerous problems and the fact that they are all symptoms of a general crisis and point back to the same underlying system are hidden from view.

Another strategy, one that is more crucial in the context of my argument, concerns the complex ways in which the very terrain of political debate is always already pre-structured. In a self-reflexive chapter at the beginning of the manifesto, Hall and his colleagues mark their own kind of analysis off from those kinds which everywhere dominate political discussion. They write:

We are all familiar with these kinds of analysis. In fact, between them, they dominate orthodox discussion, serious and popular. To be interested in politics is to be interested in these things and in these ways. It is often difficult to see how things might be otherwise, how you could start differently. This is how a particular culture imposes its orthodoxy, in a way before any of the detailed arguments start. You may go on to differ, at this or that point, but if you accept those starting points, there are certain things you can never find time to say, or say reasonably and relevantly. The key to a political analysis is always where it starts. (Williams 1968: 17)

As, I feel, is so often the case, the thought of the British New Left – though operating with a different idiom and within a different theoretico-philosophical framework – here reminds us of the highly innovative work of many (mainly French) structuralists and poststructuralists of the same period and later (which is, of course, not to negate the critical differences between them). I think the authors’ concern, not with this or that political position or argument, but with the very *ground* on which and the very *terms* within which positions are staked out, arguments are formed and – significantly – opposition and disagreement are articulated chimes with Foucault’s brilliant investigations into the ways in which the production of discourse is a highly controlled, organized, selective and constraining affair (cf. esp. 1972a, 1972b) as well as with the very valuable research conducted in the wake of this, especially, in this context, Judith Butler’s work on matrices of intelligibility (cf. esp. 1993, 1999, 2004, 2015) and Rancière’s elaboration of the concept of ‘the distribution’ or ‘partition of the sensible’ (cf. e.g. 1999). According to Rancière, our post-political present is entirely dominated by the logic or type of partition of the sensible he terms ‘the police’:

The police is [...] first an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task; it is an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise. (1999: 29)



According to the authors of the *May Day Manifesto*, it is precisely such an order of the visible and sayable that blights any serious resistance to the capitalist system. As they argue in a discussion of the role of the mass media in this context: “The system is offered as absolute; it, and only it, is normality.” “To be outside this system, and against its values, may allow, at times, a brief invitation to join in,” though, they add, usually merely “as part of the passing show, which is normally following the existing contours of opinion” and only “on the terms of the established system.” “More commonly,” they conclude, “it allows what is said to be ignored”; “[a]nything not in the system is unofficial, amateur, voluntary or extremist, and so can be written down and out.” (Williams 1968: 145f; cf. also Hall et al. 1978: 64f) In its effort to disrupt this established “sensory order” (Rancière 1999: 24), to make understood as discourse what is commonly perceived only as noise and to turn the space in which political dispute takes place itself into an object of contestation – the need to break with accepted “definitions of the situation” (Hall et al. 1978: 65), e.g. with the definition of something like poverty, is, for instance, emphasized throughout the text – the manifesto can, I think, be read as an attempt to reactivate ‘politics’ in the sense given to the term by Rancière, for whom “[p]olitics is primarily conflict over the existence of a common stage and over the existence and status of those present on it”, “an intervention”, as he puts it elsewhere, “in the visible and the sayable” (1999: 26f, 2015: 45).

Closely connected with all of this is the critique of what the manifesto calls the “consensual society” (Williams 1968: 143). It is here that the similarities with the theorists of the post-political are most pronounced. For what thinkers like Lefort, Badiou, Rancière, Žižek, Laclau and Mouffe all have in common is their disdain for the system of consensus democracy, because it is a system that leaves no room for the *fundamental* – that is, relating to the very foundations of society – forms of conflict and antagonism that lie at the heart of the political. Thus, according to Rancière, “[b]efore becoming a preference for peace over war, consensus is a certain regime of the perceptible: the regime in which the parties are supposed as already given, their community established and the count of their speech identical to their linguistic performance.” (1999: 102) As such, consensus forecloses the institution of a dispute about the distribution of the sensible itself, about the very constitution of its participants as well as of the object and stage of the discussion. It thus effectively erases what Rancière calls ‘dissensus’, “the demonstration of a gap in the sensible itself”, which is the “essence of politics” (2015: 46). Because of this, Rancière can declare: “Consensus consists [...] in the reduction of politics to the police. Consensus is the ‘end of politics’: in other words, not the accomplishment of the ends of politics [as someone like Fukuyama might assert] but simply a return to the normal state of things – the non-existence of politics.” (2015: 50f)



Hall's own critique of the consensus is often developed in the context of his productive work on the media. In a number of contributions (cf. e.g. Hall et al. 1978: 53-77; Hall 1981), he has carefully laid out how the media process of signification "*both assumes and helps to construct society as a 'consensus'*" (Hall et al. 1978: 55). This means, in Hall's words, that the 'consensual viewpoints' propagated by the media

represent society as if there are no major cultural or economic breaks, no major conflicts of interests between classes and groups. [...] Of course, [...] it is conceded that there will be differences of outlook, disagreement, argument and opposition; but these are understood as taking place within a broader basic framework of agreement – 'the consensus' – to which everyone subscribes, and within which every dispute, disagreement or conflict of interest can be reconciled by discussion, without recourse to confrontation or violence. (Hall et al. 1978: 55f)

As Hall and his colleagues argue, this assumption of the consensual nature of society also determines political practice – with the effect that the nature of the political system is profoundly transformed. In two powerful passages of the *May Day Manifesto* that echo strongly with the writings of Rancière or Mouffe, they proclaim:

The political aim of the new capitalism, and of the governments which sustain it, is clear. It is to muffle real conflict, to dissolve it into a false political consensus; to build, not a genuine and radical community of life and interest, but a bogus conviviality between every social group. Consensus politics, integral to the success of the new capitalism, is in its essence manipulative politics, the politics of management, and as such deeply undemocratic. Governments are still elected, M.P.s assert the supremacy of the House of Commons. But the real business of government is the management of consensus between the most powerful and organized elites. (Williams 1968: 143)

And, elsewhere:

All is now: restless, visionless, faithless: human society diminished to a passing technique. No confrontation of power, values or interests, no choice between competing priorities, is envisaged or encouraged. It is a technocratic model of society, conflict-free and politically neutral, dissolving genuine social conflicts and issues in the abstractions of 'the scientific revolution', 'consensus', 'productivity'. (Williams 1968: 45)

It seems to me that this diagnosis has lost nothing of its topicality. As the passages make clear, with the transfiguration of politics from an antagonistic confrontation of alternatives and an open conflict of interests into the management of consensus, administration and pragmatism,⁴ we are entering the era of what Rancière and the

⁴ As Rancière points out with regards to this technocratic order: "Any dispute, in this system, becomes the name of a problem. And any problem can be reduced to a simple lack – a simple holding up – of the means to solve it. Identifying and dealing with the lack must then be substituted for the manifestation of wrong [which, for Rancière, lies at the root of politics.]" (1999: 107)



political theorist Colin Crouch, albeit from different perspectives, have termed 'post-democracy'. In fact, the picture the manifesto paints of the state of the democratic system in the Britain of the 1960s is very similar to the account presented by Crouch (2005): While democratic institutions and procedures are formally still intact, democracy is actually being steadily undermined in the realm of political reality (cf. esp. Williams 1968: 146-50).

For one thing, in line with the prevailing "excess of consensus" (Mouffe 2005b: 6), the main political parties have become virtually interchangeable, "emptied of a real political programme" (Williams 1968: 155), all essentially functioning as agents of capital (cf. Williams 1968: 144, 156f). The political party, the authors of the manifesto maintain, has turned into an "efficient electoral machine, which by traditional inertia is still called a party", but whose main purpose is now to provide the capitalist system with the electoral legitimization it still needs, and which must hence "by no means become a serious political party in the sense of posing an alternative organization and campaign." (Williams 1968: 154) Crucially, for Hall and his fellow socialists, this verdict applies to the Labour Party as well, which has largely become incorporated into the system of "machine politics" (Williams 1968: 181) and – with social democracy having emerged as "the 'natural governor'" (Hall 1988b: 134) of the capitalist crisis – which has effectively transformed (in the sense of Gramsci's 'transformism') into "an alternative party of capital" (Hall et al. 1978: 318).

As a result, politics is increasingly turning into a spectacle (cf. Williams 1968: 158), performed on the various stages of the mass media and in large parts determined by PR-professionals and spin doctors – what, in his criticism of New Labour, Hall would later refer to as "the reduction of politics to public relations and the manipulation of public opinion" (2003: 23).⁵ Meanwhile, the authors of the manifesto concur with Crouch, the main political decision-making goes on behind closed doors, where it is principally the economic elites that call the tune. What, in the words of the manifesto, we witness is thus that "the apparently open democratic process of parliament is being steadily replaced [...] by a new and interlocking set of governing institutions: [...] the congress of a modern capitalist state and its political nominees." (Williams 1968: 153) It is this "adjustment to the demands of managed capitalism" (Williams 1968: 144) that has led thinkers like Badiou and Rancière to speak of "capitalist-parliamentarianism" (Badiou 2005: 17) and of the "absolute identification of politics with the management of capital" (Rancière 1999: 113). As the manifesto points out, the use of the concept of the 'national interest' and of the rhetoric of 'political realism' – which Rancière has fittingly referred to as "the system of belief peculiar to the consensus system" (1999: 132) – are particularly important discursive strategies in this context, endlessly reiterating the

⁵ For a political critique of the practice of polling opinion that somewhat seems to anticipate Jean Baudrillard's remarks on such topics, cf. Williams 1968: 154.



limits of “the art of the possible” (Williams 1968: 157) and “the truth of the impossibility of the impossible” (Rancière 1999: 132; cf. also Žižek 2008: 236f).

What all of this amounts to, then, is a democracy *after* the *demos* (cf. Rancière 1999: 102). Anticipating the analyses of Rancière and Crouch, Hall and his colleagues argue that the emergence of what they call “managed politics” means the effective reduction of democracy to a mere empty “ritual”, whose “institutions are [...] converted to machines which even within themselves give the illusion but never the fact of democratic participation” (Williams 1968: 148, 147, 149). The manifesto portrays the parliamentary system as a fossilized and bureaucratic “administrative machine” (Williams 1968: 148) not only largely emptied of popular content, but now even remodeled to strategically write ‘the people’ out of the political process. The authors predict that soon this development may be complete:

The government is then not the people in power, but a broker, a co-ordinator, a part of the machine. What can then be achieved [...] is the final expropriation of the people’s active political presence. Instead, we shall have a new technocratic politics, fitted into the modern state. It is a politics which would replace, even at the formal level, all older theories of the sovereignty of the people through their elected representatives.⁶ (Williams 1968: 149)

The political apathy among the population so often diagnosed today is thus built into the system (cf. Williams 1968: 149f; Rancière 1999: 113). As it spreads, and, as Hall would write in 1998, as “Economic Man[,] or [...] The Enterprising Subject and the Sovereign Consumer, have supplanted the idea of the citizen and the public sphere” (1998: 11), the expulsion of the political from the social sphere seems virtually complete.

This brings me to my next point and to the question concerning the nature of the political in Hall’s thought.

Contingent and Contested Foundations

While there are many parallels between Crouch and Rancière regarding the democratic deficits of contemporary post-democracies, there are significant divergences when it comes to the question how these developments and especially their causes are to be interpreted. Whereas political scientists such as Crouch tend to analyze post-democracy merely in terms of a simple *decline* – Crouch himself uses the analogy of a parabola (2005: 5ff) – political philosophers such as Rancière locate the problem on a more

⁶ In line with much anarchist and radical-democratic theory, the authors add that the system of representative democracy has of course “always been meant to limit popular power” (Williams 1968: 146).



elementary level, namely that of a disavowal or neutralization of the political (cf. Marchart 2010: 333-38). I think that texts like the *May Day Manifesto* or *Policing the Crisis* somewhat hover in between these two perspectives: while their focus clearly lies on concrete phenomena, there are, as I have already indicated, also a number of passages which allow themselves to be read as indicative of a more fundamental conception of the political. If we bring these into dialogue with some of Hall's other writings, I believe that, though he does not work with the conceptual distinction,⁷ we can nevertheless distill an implied understanding of the political from his work, which reveals his thought to belong to the horizon of what Oliver Marchart (2010) has called 'post-foundationalism'. The key elements in this notion of the political are *contingency* and *conflictuality*.

As the name suggests, 'post-foundationalism' designates the historical constellation in which the non-existence of any absolute or final foundation – itself an ontological fact – becomes manifest and actualized in the language games of existing discourses and hence leads to an unending questioning and deconstruction of all metaphysical figures suggestive of an ultimate grounding. Crucially, as Marchart points out, 'post-foundationalism' should not be confused with 'anti-foundationalism'; what is being denied is the possibility of ever instituting the social in any *ultimate* way, not the necessity of the process of founding society as such. The creation of such foundations is inevitable – but, to take up a phrase of Judith Butler's (1992), they are 'contingent foundations' – the ground persists in the form of its necessary absence (Marchart 2010: 16f).

I believe that just such an emphasis on contingency and, more to the point, on the contingency of foundations and what Marchart (2010: 29) calls the constant play of the institution/destitution of the social is central to Hall's theoretical work. Against all discourses that proclaim some form of primordial essence, Hall has tirelessly stressed the constructed and provisional nature of all social identities and objectivities. In this, he was undoubtedly heavily influenced not just by Gramsci, but especially by Derridean deconstruction. However, importantly, Hall was never satisfied by the simple alternative to essentialism posited by many (American) deconstructivists, namely that of a deferral (the second meaning besides 'to differ' of the French *différer* played on by Derrida's neologism *différance*) of meaning without end. In Hall's work, concepts such as 'articulation', 'suture', 'positionality' and 'arbitrary closure' are explicitly mobilized to get beyond what is itself yet another binarism: the one between essentialism or foundationalism on the one hand and the unstoppable play of difference on the other.

⁷ As far as I am aware, Hall has evoked the distinction on only one occasion, when, in the context of a critique of Foucault, he argues that Foucault "saves for himself 'the political' with his insistence on power, but [...] denies himself a politics because he has no idea of the 'relations of force.'" (in Grossberg 1996: 136)



Against the mere celebration of the infinite semiosis of meaning characteristic of certain types of deconstruction, which, as far as politics is concerned, he considered to be finally ineffective, Hall insists that, as he once put it, “[t]o say anything, I have got to shut up.” (1997: 51) What he thus emphasizes is the necessity to think identity *and* difference, positionality *and* movement, or, as Marchart has it, institution *and* destitution (cf. e.g. Hall 1985: 93, 1997: 50f). He writes that

if signification depends upon the endless repositioning of its differential terms, meaning, in any specific instance, depends on the contingent and arbitrary stop – the necessary and temporary ‘break’ in the infinite semiosis of language. This does not detract from the original insight. It only threatens to do so if we mistake [...] this *positioning* [...] as a natural and permanent, rather than an arbitrary and contingent ‘ending’. (1990: 229f)

According to Hall, then, “[t]he very notion of [...] politics [...] requires the holding of the tension between that which is both placed and not stitched in place” (1997: 50).⁸ What Hall thus points to is precisely the unerasable interplay between politics and the political as discussed by Oliver Marchart, that is, the fact that it is *inevitable* to always found society anew (I have to shut up to finish a sentence and thus say something) while it is *impossible* to ever found it ultimately and for all time (every statement is just a contingent and temporary break) (cf. also Mouffe 2005b: 151f).

Now, the political dimension of such an attempt at instituting the social is immediately apparent: things could have been and can always be otherwise, the legitimacy of any foundation is open to contestation. The social, as Chantal Mouffe explains, has to be grasped as “the realm of sedimented practices, that is, practices that conceal the originary acts of their contingent political institution and which are taken for granted, as if they were self-grounded.” (2005a: 17) For neo-Gramscian thinkers like Mouffe, Laclau and Hall, in other words, every social order is the result of *contingent hegemonic articulations* – it is an expression of power relations. As the key concept of the ‘constitutive outside’ as used by Mouffe, Laclau and Hall makes clear, social identities are always based on acts of exclusion and must hence be understood as the effect of certain mechanisms of power:

identities are constructed through, not outside, difference. This entails the radically disturbing recognition that it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its *constitutive outside* that the ‘positive’ meaning of any term – and thus its ‘identity’ –

⁸ I would argue that the preferred form or genre of Hall’s theoretical interventions, the essay, can be related to this understanding of politics as well: Hall clearly favoured the context-specific or conjunctural, fragmentary and provisional staking-out of a position rather than the lengthy and ‘finished’ elaboration of a general theory. In this context, cf. Hall’s characterization of Gramsci’s work (1986b: 5ff), where virtually all of what he says about the Italian thinker may be said to apply to himself as well. This particular mode of theorizing has more recently been taken up and elaborated upon by Judith Halberstam (2011: 15-18).



can be constructed [...]. Throughout their careers, identities can function as points of identification and attachment only *because* of their capacity to exclude, to leave out, to render 'outside', abjected. Every identity has at its 'margin', an excess, something more. The unity, the internal homogeneity, which the term identity treats as foundational is not a natural, but a constructed form of closure, every identity naming as its necessary, even if silenced and unspoken other, that which it 'lacks'. (Hall 1996b: 6)

It is because of this that Laclau can claim that "identity as such *is* power." (1990: 31)

If, however, it is only through a hegemonic intervention in the shape of a 'constructed form of closure' that, just like an identity and any other kind of social entity, a system of social relations can be founded, then, as Laclau and Mouffe have repeatedly argued, it is always susceptible to being challenged. The 'excess', the 'something more', the excluded and abjected that Hall refers to persists and returns to haunt and destabilize the hegemonic order. In other words, all the other possibilities that have been repressed in the process of founding the social can be reactivated for a counter-hegemonic challenge. What Laclau and Mouffe, drawing on Carl Schmitt, call 'antagonism' is thus an ineradicable, ontological dimension of human societies.

As the discussion in the first part of this essay has already indicated, I think that a similar conviction is present in Hall's thought as well. Though Hall, for his part, does not much use the term antagonism, he too seems to be convinced of the necessary conflictuality of social relations. For instance, his work on 'moral panics' and 'folk devils' (in the shape of youth subcultures and black muggers) in post-war Britain is driven by the view that the so-called 'consensus' of that time was *not* a period of unanimous and undisputed harmony resulting from nothing but a rational process of negotiation, but in fact an expression of a particular form of hegemony. Hall and his colleagues write:

Consensus is not the opposite – it is the complementary face of domination. It is what makes the rule of the few disappear into the consent of the many. It actually consists or is founded on the conjunctural mastery of class struggle. But this mastery is displaced, through the mediating form of 'the consensus', and reappears as the *disappearance* or pacification of all conflict; or, what in consensus theory once held pride of place under the title, 'the end of ideology'. (Hall et al. 1978: 216)

Accordingly, in Hall's work, the post-war consensus largely assumes the form of a "managed dissensus" (Hall et al. 1978: 320), where social conflict, when it does not become manifest in recurrent ruptures, is constantly seething beneath the surface, its development into a full-blown antagonism or 'crisis' only avoided – and only so long – through the repeated displacements and constructions of scapegoats analyzed by Hall. As he and his colleagues explain in *Resistance through Rituals*:



in 'good' times as well as 'bad', contrary cultural definitions are always in play. [...] These discrepancies (contradictions) in situation, values and action then provide the real material and historical basis – under the right conditions – for more developed class strategies of open resistance, struggle, and for counter-hegemonic strategies of rupture and transformation. (Clarke et al. 1993: 43)

Although the theoretical framework and idiom here are arguably still those of an 'older' Marxism (most notably the exclusive focus on class differences), the point is made very clearly. In an interview given in 1992, Hall even uses Laclau and Mouffe's term, when, speaking of the cultural domain, he declares: "The cultural field is a field of proliferating antagonisms. Antagonism is the only way in which the endlessly contradictory terrain of cultural production and articulation can be grasped and grappled with, within theoretical reflection." (in Chen 1996: 404) It is the repression of this elemental conflictuality that lies at the roots of Hall's critique of consensus politics and of ideologies (for that is of course what they are) relating to the 'end of ideology' and the 'exhaustion of political ideas' of the 60s (cf. Bell 2001) and to the 'end of history' and the 'Third Way' 'beyond left and right' of the 90s (cf. Fukuyama 1992; Giddens 1994, 1998). In Hall's eyes, like those of many others on the left, the 'center-left' position of Blair's New Labour, speaking "as if there are no longer any conflicting interests which cannot be reconciled" and thus envisaging "a politics without adversaries" (1998: 10), effectively signaled the alignment of social democracy with late capitalism and the reduction of politics to the technocratic management of the current neoliberal hegemony.⁹

For Hall, 'serious' politics (cf. 1998: 10), acknowledging and, indeed, based on the essential contingency and conflictuality of every social order, has to be conceived in terms of *struggles for hegemony*.¹⁰ Here, he parts company with other theorists of the post-political, most notably with Badiou, Rancière and Žižek. While, for instance, both Hall and Rancière would agree that a political action is not a priori defined by its object or place (cf. e.g. Hall 1996c: 234; Rancière 1999: 31ff) – "nothing is political in itself[,] [b]ut anything may become political" (1999: 32), Rancière avers – this shared conviction that nothing is immune to politicization nevertheless leads to very different conclusions: whereas for Hall, in spite of the post-political tendencies of the present, the "game of

⁹ As Mouffe has convincingly argued (2005a, 2005b, 2009), the rise of right-wing populism in many European countries can be seen as intimately linked to these post-political realities.

¹⁰ Influenced by the work of Gramsci and Laclau, Hall has persistently and tirelessly urged the radical left to strategically enter this struggle for hegemony and to adopt a properly 'popular'/'populist' strategy that would divide society into two camps, articulate a plurality of 'demands' into an 'equivalential chain' and consolidate this chain through the construction of a popular identity (cf. Laclau 2007). In this context, cf. already the *May Day Manifesto's* uncompromising declaration: "The major division in contemporary British politics is between acceptance and rejection of the new capitalism and imperialism [...]. The most urgent political need in Britain is to make this basic line evident, and to begin the long process of unambiguous struggle and argument at this decisive point. We intend, therefore, to draw this political line [...]." (Williams 1968: 187f)



hegemony” (Hall 1996a: 268) can never be arrested so that politics, even if at different orders of magnitude, takes place all the time, for Rancière, Badiou or Žižek, it “happens very little or rarely” (Rancière 1999: 17). According to these thinkers, the only politics worthy of the name is tied to “the absolute singularity of an event” (Badiou 2005: 23); it is an “anomaly” (Rancière 2015: 43), a total “rupture with what is” (Badiou 2005: 7), brought about by a radical and true ‘act’ not based in the symbolic order but marking the irruption of the unrepresentable Real into the realm of the ontic. What is more, politics is here conceived as inseparable from, even synonymous with, ‘democracy’ and ‘equality’ in the case of Rancière, ‘truth’, ‘justice’ and ‘equality’ in the case of Badiou – that is to say, in one way or another, politics, by definition always directed against the ‘police’ and the ‘State’/‘state’, is understood to be inherently emancipatory. Anything to which these criteria do not apply is simply denied the status of politics.

As Marchart (2010: 295, 173, 325f) has pointed out, such a conception of politics is still decidedly under the spell of the revolutionary imaginary¹¹ and always in danger of turning politics into a quasi-religious affair¹² – which can, as the work of Žižek (cf. 2009: 183) illustrates, paradoxically result in the replacement of activism with a-political attentism (in the sense that all that is left for us to do is wait for the ‘accident’ of the messianic event – or, as Laclau [2007: 232-39] puts it in his critique of Žižek: wait for the Martians). Thus, despite the brilliant insights contained in the work of philosophers such as Badiou or Rancière, from the point of view of both Hall’s deconstructivist and neo-Gramscian understanding of the political as well as our experiences of political reality, such an approach to the question of politics is hardly very convincing. In fact, on close examination, these thinkers, because they reify the play of the political difference (institution/destitution) into a simple dualism, do not really offer any theory of *politics* at all, but what Marchart (2010: 289f) has aptly referred to as a ‘politics of *the political*’, cleansed of all traces of politics.

It is obvious that Hall’s approach is a very different one. One could perhaps say that as a result of the combined effects of his commitment to political practice, to conjunctural theorizing, to the concrete rather than the abstract, and to socialism – even socialism as a humanism, though this humanism was from the outset one with ‘post-humanist’ inflections (cf. Badmington 2003); as a result of the ‘culturalist’ strand within Cultural Studies (cf. Hall 1986a), and, last but by no means least, of his strong affinity and engagement with the thought of Gramsci, Hall was never in danger of relinquishing the sphere of actual politics. For him, politics could not possibly consist in a pure, heroic

¹¹ In fact, it could be argued that what returns under a new guise in these thinkers’ take on the political difference is the old dichotomy between revolution and reform (Bedorf 2010: 34).

¹² It seems hardly coincidental that Badiou, Žižek, Agamben and others have been inspired by Saint Paul (cf. e.g. Badiou 2003). In this context, cf. also Peter Sloterdijk’s (2004: 825-27) critique of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri and his sardonic remark that “when the bourgeois revolution fails or does not suffice, what emerges is left-wing radicalism; when left-wing radicalism fails or does not suffice, what emerges is a gnosis of militancy” (2004: 827, my translation).



act of absolute rupture, emerging, as it were, from some kind of vacuum beyond the social, and it did not have a specific content – e.g. emancipation – already written into it. Instead, it was an extremely complex, dynamic and uncertain game, in which we could not but get our hands dirty. As virtually his entire oeuvre, but perhaps most emblematically his brilliant analysis of Thatcherism (cf. the essays collected in Hall 1988c, esp. 1988a), shows, politics must be conceived of along the lines of Gramsci's 'war of position', where one is forced to move and organize on an always already pre-structured, uneven, convoluted and shifting terrain and to fight on various fronts, where every intervention is necessarily strategic and 'compromised', based on the forging of alliances, on bargains and negotiations, where every position, coalition and identity is always provisional, and where no victory is ever absolute. It is, in a word, not something pure, but a dirty, messy business. Marchart (2010), who subscribes to a similar conception of politics, speaks of a new, Machiavellian, political realism (to be confounded neither with the realism propagated by the reigning neoliberal elites nor with Badiou and Žižek's politics of the Lacanian Real) and a 'politics of the conditional', as opposed to the 'politics of the unconditional' of other post-foundational theorists.

To conclude, I think that the 'post-foundational moment' is a *defining* moment for Hall's theoretical endeavors. It lies at the roots of his efforts towards a Marxism that should be 'open' and 'without guarantees' (1986b: 6, 1996d)¹³ and of his advocacy of what he once referred to as "politics [...] in the face of the contingent" (1997: 59). In other words, his thinking is propelled by a radical notion of contingency, which accounts for the fact that, in his work, whether it is identities, relations of power, ideologies, cultures, capitalism, conjunctures or the state, nothing, to borrow a phrase from Virginia Woolf, is ever one thing, nothing is ever simple. I believe that Hall's understanding of the political and the conclusions for politics he drew from it place him alongside thinkers such as Gramsci, Laclau and Mouffe as those whose thought may be most helpful today, not just for comprehending the pervasive, diverse and complex power relations in which we are caught – many others do this as well – but, just as importantly, for conceiving possibilities of concrete emancipatory practice beyond the disabling binary of post-political consensus and deliberative democracy¹⁴ on the one hand and revolutionary event on the other.

¹³ As Hall (in Grossberg 1996: 148f) himself once indicated in an interview, his theoretical position could well be labelled 'post-Marxist', in the sense in which, for instance, Laclau and Mouffe (2001: 4f) have used this term.

¹⁴ Concerning the question of democracy, in one of his later texts, Hall (2010: 235ff) explicitly subscribes to the model of a 'radical and plural', 'agonistic democracy' developed and advocated by Laclau and especially Mouffe (cf. Laclau/Mouffe 2001; Mouffe 2005a, 2005b, 2009, 2013).



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