

Cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1932-2014): A political career dedicated to opposing Marxism

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Stuart Hall, who died in London February 10 at the age of 82, was the academic figure most closely identified with the growth of Cultural Studies in British universities. His obituaries have been fulsome.

Cultural Studies originated as part of an attack on revolutionary Marxism, directed above all against its contemporary expression, Trotskyism. The academic field sought to shift the focus of social criticism away from class and onto other social formations, thus promoting the development of identity politics. Its establishment, in the final analysis, was a hostile response to the gains made by the Trotskyist movement in Britain from the 1950s onwards.

Various media commentators have enthused about Hall's ability to "identify key questions of the age". History will judge him more harshly: his answers to these questions were confused, misleading and often supine. Despite his supposedly independent "Marxist" stance, Hall's political outlook throughout his academic and political career aligned him closely with the Euro-communist wing of the old Stalinist Communist Party, eventually becoming a prominent writer for the magazine *Marxism Today*. The latter served as the ideological godfather of New Labour.

Hall was born in 1932 into a middle-class Jamaican family. His father was the first non-white person to hold a senior position (chief accountant) with United Fruit, the American corporate giant, on the island. His mother, who had some white ancestors, continued to identify with the distant colonial power.

Martin Jacques, former editor of *Marxism Today*, has claimed that Hall saw Britain "differently, not as a native but as an outsider". More properly, he saw it as a *non-native petty bourgeois*. Everything about Hall's upbringing suggests he was only seeking a different arrangement of the existing power structures in order to locate himself as a member of this emerging middle class layer.

Hall received an English classical education in Kingston, but felt constrained by the racist restrictions of colonialism. His route out was a Rhodes scholarship to Oxford University in 1951. Oxford, unsurprisingly, also failed to address the underlying problems he had encountered in Jamaica, and he again experienced a sense of displacement.

His time at Oxford coincided with turbulent political upheavals internationally, centred on the crisis within the Stalinist regime in the USSR and the various Communist Parties. His response to this crisis shaped his subsequent political development. His academic work can only be properly seen as part of a broader anti-communist response.

Central to the struggle waged by Leon Trotsky against the Stalinist bureaucracy was the defence of the programme of world socialist revolution against Stalin's theory of building "socialism in a single country". Internationally, the latter perspective translated into a policy of encouraging the various national Communist Parties to secure alliances with supposedly progressive tendencies and sections of the local

bourgeoisie supportive of the Soviet Union.

For the British Stalinists, from the mid-1920s onward, this meant an orientation to the trade union and Labour Party bureaucracy. During the Second World War, this led to support for British imperialism and Winston Churchill as allies of the Soviet Union. The net result was a process of political integration of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) into the structures of British imperialism, codified in the party's postwar renunciation of revolution and explicit adoption of the parliamentary-reformist "British Road to Socialism" in 1951.

Crisis of Stalinism

This conditioned the response of CPGB leaders and many members to the political crisis that erupted following Stalin's death in March 1953. In a "secret speech" in 1956, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev acknowledged certain of Stalin's crimes. That same year, Hungarian workers rose against the Stalinist regime in that country. When demonstrators were killed, workers' councils were organised. The Soviet military was dispatched, and up to 20,000 lives were lost.

The Trotskyists of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), organised in Britain in a group around Gerry Healy, intervened to insist upon and clarify the counter-revolutionary character of Stalinism and win over those elements in the Communist Party genuinely animated by the ideals of Lenin and the Bolsheviks. Significant figures were won to Trotskyism at the time, including Cliff Slaughter, Tom Kemp and Peter Fryer. In 1957, the Trotskyists were able to launch the journal *Labour Review* and the weekly *Newsletter* to wage a political-theoretical offensive, leading to the formation of the Socialist Labour League (SLL) in 1959.

The standpoint of the Healy tendency was shaped by the struggle it had waged alongside James P. Cannon and the US Socialist Workers Party against a pro-Stalinist, liquidationist tendency led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel, leading up to a split in 1953 out of which the ICFI emerged.

The Pabloites, having attributed a revolutionary potential to Stalinism, were to argue over the next period that Khrushchev's revelations indicated a process of "self-reform" and the crystallisation of a revolutionary tendency within the bureaucracy under the pressure of the working class. Their supporters would spend the ensuing decades painting all manner of splits and tendencies emerging from the break-up of British Stalinism as new healthy, "revolutionary" departures—above all, the forces that were to make up the so-called New Left, in which Hall became a

leading figure.

In reality, although there was a mass exodus from the British Communist Party, the majority of the emigrants either dropped out of politics altogether or, following the Stalinists' line to its logical conclusion, comfortably found a home within the Labour Party and trade union apparatus. The pro-Labour tendencies emerging from the CPGB launched numerous journals to promote and justify their reformist-nationalist adaptation and orientation.

Chief among these were *New Reasoner*, founded in 1957 by the historians E.P. Thompson and John Saville, and *Universities and Left Review*, edited by Stuart Hall. Against the Trotskyists' international revolutionary perspective, these publications advocated a supposedly "English Marxist" tradition to justify their opportunism. *New Reasoner* claimed to be elaborating a "socialist humanist" version of Marxism, promoting the "British Road" advanced by the CPGB, but carried out instead through the Labour Party.

This was Hall's preferred political milieu, and he never left it. Significantly, while editing *Universities and Left Review*, Hall stayed in the house of Jock Haston, whom he described as "a wonderful old Trotskyist". In fact, Haston was by then a bitter opponent of Trotskyism. He had left the movement in 1950, explicitly rejecting the Fourth International, declaring in a resignation letter that "we have no right to claim political and organisational authority as the international leadership of the world proletariat". Haston, the future mentor of various trade union bureaucrats, pledged his loyalty to the Labour Party, asserting that despite its "bureaucratic feature...it is one of the most democratic workers' organisations in existence...the task is to loyally adhere to the mass party and seek to drive it forward on the road to the complete transformation of the system".

Hall shared Haston's outlook to the letter. He joined a New Left made up of ex- and current members of the CPGB, various petty-bourgeois breakaways from the Fourth International and left Labourites seeking to provide the Labour and trade union bureaucracy with a buffer against Trotskyist criticism and opposition.

The New Left and the Cuban revolution

The New Left specifically rejected Lenin's theory of the vanguard party, which was blamed for the development of Stalinism, and the need for a fight for socialist theory and politics against the prevailing consciousness, which, in Britain, above all, meant a national, trade union outlook.

Writing in the *New Reasoner* in 1959, for example, the former Stalinist Eric Heffer, who had rejoined Labour in 1956, wrote, "The 'Vanguard' corresponded to a given historical need but is not essential today: in fact, it is a definite hindrance".

Heffer, who ended up loyally serving the bourgeoisie as a Labour MP for nearly three decades, called for "more space" on this question in the journal and, specifically, "a critique of the Trotskyist solution" to it.

For Hall, as for many left intellectuals on their way toward the establishment, another political milestone was the 1959 Cuban revolution, led by Fidel Castro.

The primary appeal of Castro's coming to power for these elements lay in its supposed demonstration that a successful struggle could be waged against imperialism by a social force *other than* the working class organised in a politically independent fashion by the Marxist movement. Tellingly, prior to the opportunist declaration by Castro and Che Guevara—based on the needs of their alliance with the Soviet Stalinists as a counterweight to US aggression—that they were "Communists", Hall

said he was "more excited" about the Cuban revolution than the Russian revolution.

In 1960, Hall was one of the founding editors of the *New Left Review* (*NLR*), which has been a deplorable fount of anti-Marxism ever since. He retired after 12 issues, in 1962, but the association continued throughout his life and defined his politics. Writing in *NLR* in 2010, he summarised the New Left's conflation of Stalinism with Bolshevism, and its opposition to Trotskyism: "We had a deep conviction that against the economism of the Stalinist, Trotskyist and Labourist left alike, socialism was a *conscious* democratic movement and socialists were *made*, not born or given by the inevitable laws of history or the objective processes of the mode of production alone".

When the self-serving phrases are peeled away, what do these formulations mean? Hall and company opposed and rejected the objective, historical fact that socialism is based on the working class. His "Marxism" was an ideology purpose-built to meet the requirements of the "left" petty-bourgeoisie, discontented, looking for "space", but tied by a thousand strings to the existing order. The rejection of class as the decisive political factor came to find expression in Hall's embrace of Cultural Studies.

Cultural Studies

In 1964, Hall joined Richard Hoggart as a research fellow at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham. Four years later, he became acting director, taking the post permanently in 1972. CCCS became the beacon of Cultural Studies, which borrowed certain conceptions from the Italian left-wing figure Antonio Gramsci, particularly the latter's notion of cultural hegemony in addressing popular culture as a preferred sphere of political activity.

Gramsci was attractive not merely for his cultural writings—many of which were produced during solitary confinement under the Mussolini fascist regime—but also for his attacks on economic determinism, his explicit rejection of the theory of Permanent Revolution and his justification of the nationalist orientation of Stalinism: As Gramsci declared, "To be sure, the line of development is toward internationalism, but the point of departure is 'national'—and it is from this point of departure that one must begin".

Hall's central theme was the repudiation of the class struggle as the axis of social development, as this assumes that the working class is the decisive agent of political change. Instead, he argued for a turn to the cultural sphere. This was not a Marxist appraisal or critique of culture, but the elevation of "culture" as an arena contested by different "agencies".

Longtime Pabloite Tariq Ali wrote that Hall said, "half-joking to friends that his cultural studies project was politics by other means". That indeed it was: a project that replaced class as the central political factor by race, gender, sexual orientation, nationality and other "sub-cultures" and "identities", making it impossible, in the end, to address capitalist exploitation. Instead, the struggle had to be conducted in every supposedly "relatively autonomous" sphere. The logic led to garden variety single-issue, bourgeois-reformist politics, as an article Hall co-authored last year made clear: "Mobilising resistance thus requires alliances of a sort which only a multi-focused political strategy can hope to construct".

Hall is perhaps best remembered as the individual who coined the term "Thatcherism". He did so in one of a series of articles for *Marxism Today*, the journal associated with the Euro-communist wing of the CPGB, which was most pronounced in its adaptation to British imperialism and acted as adviser to the right wing of social democracy.

When Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government came to power in

1979, *Marxism Today* concluded that the old policies of social reforms and welfare could no longer be advanced. In laying the ground for New Labour, it deployed two prominent academics, the historian Eric Hobsbawm and Hall.

Hobsbawm's "Forward March of Labour Halted" was an apologia for the betrayals of Labour and the unions. It claimed that the crisis of the labour movement could be attributed to the decline of the working class, and that industrial militancy had failed to answer the shortcomings of the Labour government. It was the fault of the working class, Hobsbawm argued, that Labour had lost support, not that Labour's abject betrayals and rightward shift had opened the door for Thatcher.

Hall wrote about the shift of the ruling class towards "authoritarian populism" in "The Great Moving Right Show". Social democracy, he wrote, contained a contradiction that provided "the principal key to the whole rightward shift of the political spectrum". Social democracy claimed to be the political representative of the working class, but in power then had to seek support "from key sections of capital". Many commentators have praised Hall for his "prescient" appraisal of Thatcherism, and his insistence that Labour could not rely on its traditional (trade union) methods to defeat it. Key among the enthusiasts in Labour's top echelons were Neil Kinnock and Tony Blair.

Hall was hardly prescient. His response only legitimised the rightward lurch he was supposedly explaining. Obituaries have presented Hall as critical of New Labour, which he may have been over certain issues, but he had provided its essential underpinning. He concluded his 1979 article with the argument that the right were "gaining ground in defining the 'conjunctural.'" This is exactly the terrain on which the forces of opposition must organise, if we are to transform it".

Tariq Ali has claimed that some on the "left", but not Jacques or Hall, took this to mean "contestation was no longer possible" and defected, first to Kinnock and then to Blair. His defence of Hall is risible. Hall's article, like Hobsbawm's, justified adapting to the popularity of Thatcherism by a turn to the right. *Marxism Today* intended it to be read that way, which is why Kinnock and Blair welcomed it.

Hobsbawm became an adviser to Kinnock, speaking alongside him at the 1983 Labour conference. Blair used the pages of *Marxism Today* to float "New Labour" for the first time in 1990. By 2004, Jacques, who today champions Chinese capitalism, was writing that Blair was now "the only show in town".

David Morley and Bill Schwarz, writing in the *Guardian*, argue that every intellectual venture in which Hall was involved resulted in "intellectual positions that [he] could never endorse". A remarkable legacy! This merely points to the fact that Hall's theoretical distortions and anti-Marxist confusionism eased the way for the rightward movement of petty-bourgeois layers, whose logic Hall was canny enough to hold back from.

Hall was ever loyal to bourgeois politics. He was reportedly cheered by the election of Barack Obama as "someone with Hussein for a middle name" in the United States, and, after the crash of 2008, was "mesmerised by the sight of capitalism [supposedly] falling apart of its own accord".

He remained with other former Euro-communists firmly in the orbit of the Labour Party, acting as an apologist for and adviser to social democracy during the decades in which it abandoned its former reformist politics in favour of an overtly semi-Thatcherite glorification of the market.

The best Hall could muster was the polite advice that Labour should retain some minimal reforms within its political armoury so as not to lose all popular support. In 2012, for example, he wrote that Ed Miliband "has been so watchful of his back that he can't go forward. You can't conduct a successful political revival on that basis. Sometimes, you have to have some courage".

Last year, Hall collaborated with various ageing ex-Stalinist co-thinkers

such as Beatrix Campbell on the Kilburn Manifesto—to urge a Labour government and to oppose class-based politics once again. "Each crisis provides an opportunity to shift the direction of popular thinking", he declared. "The left, and Labour in particular, must adopt a more courageous, innovative, 'educative' and path-breaking strategic approach if they are to gain ground".

"Nor is economic class the only salient social division", he insisted. "Gender, racial, ethnic and sexual divisions long predate the birth of capitalism, and still structure social relations in distinctive ways.... This requires us to rethink social relations from another perspective".

Praise for Hall as a theoretician and political commentator is entirely misplaced. From the outset, Cultural Studies was a campaign directed against Marxism. The political trajectories of its leading figures are stark reminders of its bankruptcy, whether in the form of Raymond Williams's Welsh nationalism or Hall's lifelong embrace of Labour.



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