

Hamish Henderson and Cultural Activism

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Abstract:

This article is based on *The Hamish Henderson Memorial Lecture* given in the Scottish Storytelling Centre on 9th November 2024. I start with some general thoughts on what is culture, and cultural activism. Then I examine the cultural activism of Hamish Henderson (1919-2002) poet, songwriter, soldier and scholar. He was a world-renowned folklorist, a pioneering lecturer in the School of Scottish Studies, founded in Edinburgh University In 1951, and a leader in the folk song revival of the 1950s and 1960s. His activism was influenced by the ideas of Antonio Gramsci, Italian Marxist philosopher and writer (1891-1937) imprisoned and tortured by the fascist Italian state. Gramsci was also a very important influence on the Liberation movement in Latin American in the 1960s and 70s. I will discuss how the influence of Paolo Freire came to be embedded in the practice of the Adult Learning Project (ALP) in Edinburgh and share some examples of liberating cultural action which demonstrate the values and beliefs ALP shared with Henderson, Gramsci and Freire.

Introduction

Culture is that which humans make from nature. Human culture. It can be seen to consist of three elements or spheres: Economic, Political and Social. The act of creating culture is of course, like everything else, contradictory. Elon Musk and Donald Trump are cultural activists who seek to change human culture to their advantage. Margaret Thatcher let the dogs out on

collectivism in public civil life in Britain and hugely undermined it, this being a transformative cultural shift at the time. In his most famous text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire proposes that the contradiction of the era in Brazil is that cultural action can be either for liberation or oppression. In this text he lays out his ideas and a liberating educational method to develop consciousness and cultural actions that were critical of oppression. What Gramsci, Freire, Henderson and the Adult Learning Project in Edinburgh were engaged in was Cultural action for Freedom rather than domination a la Musk, Trump and Thatcher and a challenge to the hegemony of their times.

Hamish as Cultural Activist for Freedom

Cultural activists can simply appear in a community. In times of cultural change participants involved in the ALP project for education and community action, labour movements and liberatory organisations can emerge from those entities as cultural activists. A teacher of mine, when I studied community development, maintained that change agents (Cultural activists) in a society or community are often those he termed 'Status inconsistencies': Folk who somehow stand slightly outside their community and its norms; who, while valuing that community, can see it more clearly from a distance and therefore develop a critical perspective. A sense of being an outsider, however, can increase a longing for belonging. Hamish found his belonging being part of the traveller and folk revivalist communities and the cultural and political hothouse of Edinburgh's Sandy Bells Bar.

The idea of community can of course be contradictory. A recent conference on Traditional Music named that contradiction 'Roots not Tethers'. The price of belonging may be to give up on change for the better. One may strive to balance the contradiction and live with it rather than

come down on one side or the other. Freire defines contradictions as 'Two simultaneous opposite truths'. So, Hamish grew up living that contradiction. To be the illegitimate son of a single mother in a douce wee protestant town like Blairgowrie in the 1920s must have been a great challenge, and it's no surprise that his mother took him out of it to live in an isolated rural community in Spittal of Glenshee, away from Presbyterian respectability, as he described it. There he found a rural Scots and Gaelic culture that was to enthrall him and inspire him for the rest of his life. It was an immersion in song, history and dance. It was also a portal to the ancient world of the Gael, in language, values and thought patterns, which he so highly valued. In part these things may explain his profound empathy and attraction to the Scottish Travelling folk, similarly rooted.

One cannot underestimate the influence of strong women in Hamish's relentless curiosity, learning and conviviality, in his mother, granny and primary teachers. His mother singing to him in Scots Gaelic and French demonstrated to him the value and power of local culture and stimulated his linguistic prowess in German, Italian, French and Gaelic. Perhaps it was from her, given her difficult social position, that he developed a defiant and irreverent anti-authoritarianism. Hamish became a maker as a boy, a poet. He wrote 'A poet is not a weakling but a man of action' and he became determined to be precisely that. In one of his early works 'Ballad of the 12 stations of youth' he demonstrates a critical mindset with 'And fear wee boy, the auld Kirks sin o' pride' - a theme he was to return to throughout his life, challenging the miserableness of Calvinistic zealotry. Picture a big Highlander, his mouth full of Scots and Gaelic words and a Perthshire accent arriving with his mother in Somerset as a young boy, then on to the heartland of the British establishment at Dulwich College in London, where he was educated. It must have been a challenge to say the least. Then to be orphaned when his mother dies, with no family member claiming him so he had to commute from the orphanage into the

garden of British entitlement, racism and superiority, and that he not only coped but flourished, is remarkable. This is where he became a fully-fledged cultural activist: investigating and critiquing British society while simultaneously grasping learning with both hands and acting positively to make a better place, and then out into the wider world.

Freire talks about 'The inherent contradiction of the banking system of education'; how, on one hand, it limits your learning to that which is prescribed but, on the other, gives you access to a world of ideas which may increase your competence and autonomy. Through a combination of a huge capacity for learning, and a joyous conviviality, Hamish had a transformative effect on life at Dulwich. Leading literary and debating societies, creating a Shakespeare reading group, a drama society, and a puppet society. As editor of the *Alleynian* (School newspaper) he defined his activism as requiring 'policy, a plan of campaign and a set of guiding principles' - exactly the things that make cultural action effective in overcoming the tyranny of structurelessness and apathy. He was learning how to make things happen. Dulwich was his apprenticeship as an activist and, in his years studying modern languages at Downing College Cambridge, he added left-wing ideas and actions, speaking in the union and in the socialist club. He had no family, so how could he be an embarrassment to them for being a 'Commie'? In that sense he was free to create. He had become a change agent! He learnt the three steps in the process of cultural action. 1. Investigating (Decoding) the cultural hegemony. 2. Learning and problematising. 3. Acting for change - as Paulo Freire would have it 'Cultural action for Freedom'. Once you have taken the risk to create one organisation, you lose your fear of putting your head above the parapet and gain the confidence to carry on. A challenge to the Scottish cringe. This being perhaps easier for him, as naebody 'kent his faither'.

The rest of his immense round of cultural creations just flowed on and on, and he formed alliances with others like him whom he spotted with their heads above the parapet. I will not

list all of Hamish's many, many achievements as a cultural creator but, as Captain of Intelligence in WW2 bringing together a pipe band in Anzio and organising the 51st Division's march into Rome; he learned about Gramsci by working with Italian partisans and, all the while, writing poems and songs such as *Elegies for the dead in Cyrenaica*, *Farewell to Sicily* and *John MacLean March*, he set out his stall. Committing himself to the Gramscian idea of democratisation of culture, seeing folk arts as 'subaltern', and subverting the dominant cultural hegemony, he returns to Scotland after 20 years in exile and sets about collecting and transmitting the soul of the people held in their folk arts.

He was employed as one of the first collectors of folklore at the School of Scottish Studies formed in 1951, a formation, which was itself counter-hegemonic, given for instance the Labour Party's Festival of Britain. His work on folklore is a deliberate, systematic and carefully-thought-out strategy for transforming and positivising Scotland's relationship to its indigenous culture. His head is again above the parapet, and he spots Calum Maclean of Raasay and the Irish Folklore Commission, Alan Lomax an American folklorist in Britain following blacklisting for un-American activities, and a myriad of other leftist changemakers. Then onto establishing the People's Festival in Edinburgh as an alternative to the western 'high' art of the newly established Edinburgh Festival, promoting traditional artists like the traveller/singer Jeannie Robertson. The Festival was initially sponsored by the Labour movement, then dropped as too leftist. He became the central pivot of the folk revival and a driving force in the School of Scottish studies; all the time winning hearts and minds to the cause of building a positive Scottish identity, often through his convivial court in Sandy Bells bar, a stone's throw from the University. His was a personal Praxis, very unusual for the time, where he combined his scholarly investigations into folklore with collective cultural actions. Theory becomes practice.

Hamish also was familiar with, and inspired by, Gramsci being the first translator of Gramsci's work into English, and this explains his promotion of folk cultures as anti-hegemonic. Certainly, the links between folk music and left intellectuals was very strong in the 1950s and 60s throughout the Western world and beyond. Folk music was seen as amateur, non-commodified, embedded in community and having a historicity. Links between folk arts and popular movements were strong in Latin America (see organic intellectual Victor Jara, murdered for his songs). Folk music has been a change agent in Portugal, Greece, Hungary and the Estonian 'Singing Revolution'. In Scotland in the 1950s and 60s there were strong links between folk artists, the campaign for nuclear disarmament and left and labour movements. While Hamish formed alliances with other cultural activists, it was his example, combined with his huge convivial personage, rather than a deliberate method, which gave courage and inspired collective cultural action.

Freirean Method for Cultural Action

Paulo Freire was a different kettle of fish. His deliberate and systematic approach was to develop an education method (The Problem-Posing Method) where the oppressed and poor of Brazil, immersed in a 'culture of silence' (Freire) would be transformed from 'beings for others' (Freire) into the subjects of their own existence. Freire was inspired also by Gramsci. The first translation of his 'Prison Letters' into Portuguese was in 1966, 8 years before Hamish's first translation into English in the New Edinburgh Review in 1974. Ivan Illich ('De-Schooling Society' and 'Tools for Conviviality') established Centro Intercultural de Documentación (CIDOC) in Cuernavaca, Mexico, operating from 1961 to 1976. This was a crucible for liberation theology in Latin America. There they studied Gramsci and some of the participants included Paulo Freire, Susan Sontag, Herbert Marcuse, Erich Fromm, and Peter Berger

alongside many Latin American Socialist thinkers. Ideas first given voice in Gramsci's writings find fertile ground here: for example Hegemony as an overarching, unquestioned set of ideas and practices embedded by the ruling elite. (Here we discuss Cultural Hegemony) The emergence of "Organic intellectuals" from the working class, and Praxis (Action on reflection and vice versa).

Freire's cultural activism sought to develop a liberating method for literacy, an urgent social and political need in the Brazil of that era. The method involved poor participants decoding their own living world, critiquing it and unveiling generative themes which energised and inspired them to write and read about their world. The method gives a voice to participants, breaks the 'culture of silence' and demands action to tackle the issues raised: 'The oppressed unveil the world of oppression and, through praxis, commit themselves to its transformation' (Freire, 1972).

This method proposed transformation for freedom, not domination, and not adaptation. In 1964, he trained leaders, and 20,000 discussions were to be established. However, a military coup brought an abrupt end to the leftist Goulart government, and Freire was then Imprisoned for 70 days and exiled from Brazil.

In 1978, Workers Educational Association Tutor Organiser Colin Kirkwood taught Paulo Freire's ideas and methods to a local group of adult education volunteer activists and development workers. This group secured Urban Aid funding to create the Adult Learning Project (ALP) in a working-class tenement area in Edinburgh, undergoing redevelopment. The project was managed by the Community Education department and initially employed a team of 3 Community Educators and an administrator. The task was to develop a dialogical,

participative method to address the social issues of the day and create cultural activists, or as Gramsci would have it, organic Intellectuals' who would take action in their community.

The banking learning system is what we in Scotland are familiar with, where we follow a curriculum set by others for us and comprehend and memorise lots of stuff which later we might use in jobs created for the benefit of dominant economic hegemony. ALP's Freirian approach of problem posing and dialogical education opposes the banking system.

In ALP there were three main components.

- (1) Firstly, the organisation collaborates with the community to investigate and decode the social issues and problems they face.
- (2) We then create dialogical learning classes (Culture circles) to learn all we can about the chosen topics.
- (3) And finally, we design and enact collective cultural action to tackle the issue. (Action outcomes)
- (4) Decoding is a method where we take photographs of significant events of life in the community defined by the community and then spend time with groups in structured conversations analysing the situation and identifying social issues. Therefore, the lived experience of the participants is the starting point of the educational journey. In Freire's work, the folk would go on to write about these issues and become literate while, in ALP, in a post-literate society, we would discover together what we need to learn more about and do to tackle the issues raised (reflection and action - the praxis). Thus investigation, learning and action as a sequence.

Examples from the work of ALP over time are as follows:

- (1) Investigation reveals that many Scots working class folk feel alienated and unconfident to express themselves in British culture. Learning groups are formed, advertised and recruited: Writers' workshops, the history of Scots language, Scots social and local history.
 - (2) Cultural actions: (Where the learner/participants take leadership roles). New writing publishing projects, 'Poems and Pints' events in a local pub as a platform for emerging writers.
 - (3) Local history publications. Leading oral and local history projects. Taking part in an Edinburgh-wide initiative to establish 'The People's Story' a museum of working-class history.
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- (1) Investigations revealed that women felt marginalised and undervalued.
 - (2) Learning. Women's study circles were established and women's history, writing and music groups
 - (3) Cultural actions. An action group ENACT was formed and was contracted by the local Council to create and manage a celebration of women's creativity during Women's International Week. Women's writing publications, Women's history pamphlets. Out of a Woman and Folk Song class emerged a band *Stairheid Gossip* who performed in the community and made a beautiful CD.

Other Learning and cultural action initiatives have included: Traditional Music Song and Dance, Learning the Land: a history workshop, Democracy group, Women's planning group ENACT, The Welcoming (Organising and teaching migrants and refugees), Glory and Dismay (Football and literacy), learner/activist training, and the Currach Boat (Literacy/Numeracy through boat making). After many cultural action initiatives began to thrive, it was necessary

that they be run by the participants who ALP trained to take on leadership roles. Many initiatives developed into autonomous charities as part of a federation of ALP groups. As an example, in 1988 ALP investigated folk's relationship to Scottish folk arts and in 1990 established classes in traditional Scottish instrumental music, song and dance, in the spirit of Henderson, Gramsci and Freire. Numerically this has been ALP's most successful project and shows the hunger folk have to be connected to indigenous and convivial cultural expressions, apart from the music industry. At its peak there were more than 500 learners employing an army of tutors, the project being mostly self-funded. Due to demands from the learners, the Scots Music Group created 'The Youth Gaitherin' (for young people), Sangstream (Scots folk choir) and the Scots Fiddle Festival (Annual event). All of these have become participant (cultural activist) led charities and have persisted for over 20 years. (Kirkwood and Kirkwood, 1989). The ALP Association was the overarching organisation run by participants which became a charitable company. Other voluntary associations established by participants included The Gorgie Dalry Photo Workshop, The Welcoming Project and Enact Woman's Project. Thus, folk who contribute to local investigations become learner/activists, develop a critical awareness of their culture and some go on to form voluntary associations which carry out transformative Cultural Actions, with, and in their local communities. ALP prepared folk for their roles as office bearers in training programmes. Freire himself postulated that Adult Education and Community Development will not in itself bring about cultural transformation but at certain times in history, in collaboration with popular movements, they can make significant contribution. The period leading to the referendum for Scottish independence was such a time in ALP.

Conviviality

Illich defines conviviality as the opposite of industrial productivity, or 'autonomous, creative intercourse among persons and between individuals and their environment' (Illich, 1973). If a group of learner participants follows the methodological sequence in a dialogical classroom of Saying your own word, Input of new knowledge or skill, Dialogue and integration and Summarising, then the lively opening exchange inevitably creates an atmosphere of co-operation and connected sociability. Folk find the process enlivening and enjoyable, so it feels natural that they would want to come together to celebrate and share their experience. At the end of the first term of culture circles in ALP, for example, we brought three groups together for a social event where we shared our conclusions, imagined new cultural actions, shared food, song and music. This established a tradition of socialising amongst the participants which became a regular part of ALP life. Regular social and learning events to which the wider community was invited were built into the calendar of the project. The events provided a platform for the participants. The writers' groups performed at Burns suppers. End of term music concerts were held. Public events like the 'Festival of Lights' celebrated the multi-cultural traditions at the turning of autumn into winter and drew in hundreds of locals. We held women's traditional dance nights, feasts and many, many ceilidh dances. The workers, tutors and participants in their various collectives and organising groups created an atmosphere of joyous conviviality which drew in folk and encouraged them to engage and celebrate with the project. In this process, the learners become skilled and confident cultural activists. This conviviality is opposed to the presbyterian earnestness and authoritarianism of the traditional left in Scotland.

Hamish Henderson, in the promotion of the folk song revival and opening the University folklore collections through events and cultural products, was engaged in similar convivial

exchanges within the nation. Freire describes learning as 'always social'. Gramsci was confident of the transformative power of creative culture as opposed to capitalist consumerism. Convivial community, then, exists in a defined and methodological process of collective, productive cultural activity in authentic comradeship rather than 'false gregariousness' (Freire, 1972). By adopting and adapting the educational method and practices promoted by Paulo Freire and informed by Gramsci the Adult Learning Project built and maintained a democratic learning community for more than 30 years. This convivial voluntary organisation has enabled hundreds of local working-class folk to increase their critical consciousness of the social issues they face, and acting together, as autonomous beings, to take cultural action to tackle those issues; this as a direct challenge to the commodification and alienating individuation of Neo-liberal hegemony.

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