

Inspirations

Stuart Hall

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My reasons for describing Stuart Hall as an inspiration are partly about what he did, and partly about what he was. Stuart and I worked together in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the Open University for almost 20 years. By 1979, when he joined the Open University as Professor of Sociology, Stuart was already famous. Along with Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart and others at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, he had in effect founded a new academic field. For Stuart, cultural studies represented the opening up of a way of understanding society and politics through culture which could be used to advance progressive causes of several kinds. In classical Marxism, culture is regarded as an epiphenomenon, a mere function of the economic and political structure. But a core insight of Stuart's work, in what came to be known as 'the cultural turn', was that culture, and of course the role of the media within it, is not merely reflective but *constitutive*. In other words, it has autonomous power to shape individual experience, social relations and political outcomes. How did this work? How could the Left take advantage of it?

After Stalin's tanks rolled into Hungary in 1956, many on the left in Britain finally lost all faith in the statist totalitarianism of the Soviet Union as any kind of model for a socialist future. The *New Left Review*, of which Stuart became editor, opened up a new space in which socialists could analyse and formulate strategies to oppose the excesses of capitalism and militarism at home and colonialism abroad. It was a new kind of Marxism 'without guarantees'. Just as, for Stuart, cultural studies had to have a political sensibility, a critical edge, so all of his later academic work was *engaged*. Stuart argued for a lifetime on the side of the oppressed and excluded.

John Acomfrah's elegiac film *The Stuart Hall Project*, completed to great acclaim only last year, shows how Stuart's thinking and campaigning has run like a thread through the neglected history of the British left in the last half century, from his speeches at CND rallies all over Britain in the 1960s to the first and most brilliant analysis of Thatcherism (Stuart coined the term) in the 70s and 80s, to the work on race and identity in multi-cultural Britain in the last 20 years. This can be traced in a series of famous essays through the journals *Marxism Today*, and *Soundings*, the current exploration of these themes founded by Stuart and Doreen Massey, the distinguished geographer (also a Professor at the OU). I think it is no exaggeration to say that Stuart taught us how to think in a new way about a set of ideas at the heart of our culture.

Stuart at the OU

The single most important thing to say about Stuart Hall's time at the Open University is that his dedication to teaching, to the needs of students, was exemplary. There are many professors who disdain teaching, and work for years in the solitude of libraries to produce the handful of books which make their name. Stuart was not one of them. From 1979 on, Stuart chaired a series of famous and influential OU courses in the area where Sociology met Politics and Cultural Studies: *Understanding Modern Societies*, *The State and Society*, *Beliefs and Ideologies*, *Culture, Media and Identity*. Because of the sheer scale of the OU a single first year course can have 14,000 students a year – Stuart's work and his charismatic TV performances became known to literally hundreds of thousands of students. In his writing, Stuart had a genius for teaching ideas to students who thought they hated theory. And in his packed summer school lectures, the students found his combination of breath-taking articulacy, playfulness, and sweetness of disposition irresistible.

In chairing the big course teams by whom the multimedia OU courses are produced, Stuart gave a whole new scale to what we thought we meant by 'interdisciplinarity'. His intellectual range, from literature, to history, to sociology, to psychoanalysis, to politics (of course) was extraordinary. His presence attracted to course teams not only colleagues from other Social Science disciplines, but from the Faculty of Arts, from Development Studies, and from universities around the world, as consultants.

The quality of discussion was of course extraordinarily stimulating, and one wonderful thing about working with Stuart was that we laughed a lot! But there was something else equally important going on. He had a way of bringing out the best in people who worked with him. The largest egos were moved in the direction of collegiality. The most insecure members of the team felt valued, and were increasingly encouraged to contribute, knowing that their contribution would be judged only on its merits, never on the formal status of the speaker. There was something exhilarating about that open-ness, that egalitarianism, that mutuality of respect.

Stuart led by example, and his notion of academic work was not solitary, competitive, and elitist, but profoundly collaborative and inclusive. This is a theme which runs through every account we have of his work at the Centre in Birmingham, at the OU, in editing the journals, and participating in the range of projects which he turned to in his so-called retirement. (Notably the establishment of the Rivington Place multi-cultural arts centre in Shoreditch, London, now complete with its Stuart Hall library). At his funeral, one speaker caught this memorably. He said that Stuart knew what it was to feel out of place. But in all his work, he made people feel that they had a place, with him.

For a man so celebrated, so much in demand, he was extraordinarily generous with his time and his advice. He would sit up late into the night talking to students at summer school. And he would never, as one of his graduate students remarked, be looking over your shoulder for someone more important to talk to. So many students, colleagues, writers and artists have been encouraged and empowered by Stuart.

Someone once said to me that Stuart had a bit of a soft spot for lost young men. I was one of them.

Stuart was the most intelligent person I have ever met, and the most articulate. He was enormously sensitive and perceptive. His warmth, his sense of humour, and his generosity of spirit made him much loved. In short, he was more than a famous public intellectual. He was a magnificent human being.

You can Google Stuart's work and publications easily. There are wonderful films of him on YouTube, including a great TV programme on Marxism. If you have not read Stuart's recent essay in the 2012 issue of *Soundings* on *The Neo-liberal crisis*, tracing the course of neo-liberalism in Britain from Thatcher to Blair to Cameron, you should do so now! Its available online.

<http://www.lwbooks.co.uk/ebooks/NeoliberalCrisis.html>