

Stuart Hall, Social Theorist, Educator and Visionary: A Personal Tribute.

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On the 10th of February 2014 society lost one of its greatest social theorists. Stuart Hall's death has left a raw space in the hearts and minds of all who knew him and his work. Hall was a man who understood contradictions and the way in which the catalyst of a marked identity can give rise to a deep understanding of the struggle for social change. As he grew up in Jamaica, his identity was formed in the light of "shades of black" racism as well as the complexity of colonial mentality. Yet it was this very complexity that facilitated Hall's brilliant theorising - a theorising that has a powerful message for Community Education today. To fully understand Hall's message and the man himself, it is important to consider how, during his time with The Birmingham School of Cultural Studies and the Open University, Hall drew together the work of different theorists in order to explore and explain social change and injustice.

Hall shifted away from deterministic Marxism, but still sought to understand inequality. He immersed himself in the work of Althusser, Gramsci and Laclau; the result was a theory that explored the power that shapes our lives and the potential to resist that power. Hall was interested in Althusser's work because it theorised the way in which subjects are structured by dominant ideologies and positioned through interpellation into identity positions that are not in their interests. However he shifted from Althusser's ideologically structured subject to allow for a more complex and fluid theory of identity formation. He drew on Laclau's argument that ideologies would always be articulated and rearticulated by different groups in ways linked to their differing experiences, thus introducing spaces for resistance and social change. Raymond Williams's concept of a community's "lived experience" also influenced Hall. If dominant ideologies hailed a community whose "lived experience" did not

match these ideas, then contradictions allowed for resistance with the emergence of new ideas and new social movements. Strongly influenced by the work of Antonio Gramsci, Hall theorised this shift between articulation and rearticulation in terms of hegemonic struggle, a struggle that took place at the level of grassroots popular culture; a struggle between differing groups to present their world view as “common sense”, which is defined as beyond questioning. For Hall, the outcome of this struggle had no determined conclusion, but his aim was always to explore how the inherent inequality of society might be understood and transformed.

When I started to write this I did not want only to get caught into theory but also to revisit the reasons why Stuart Hall had such a powerful impact on my ideas and on my practice. Hall was my inspiration. He strongly influenced my thinking as a student; when I went on to tutor, he became a valued Open University colleague. In my role as a Community Educator he inspired in me the belief that we should never cease to struggle against injustice whilst respecting the “lived experience” of the communities that we engage with. Many things have shifted in Community Education but we still work with the excluded and we should still be the catalyst for communities “seeing through” dominant world views that are not in their interests. The contradictions that interested Hall and made him into a theoretical genius are the same contradictions that communities face today. Migrants seeking to make a home in Scotland, but feeling displaced from their cultural roots, employment initiatives offered in communities where there are few employment opportunities and vulnerable families facing poverty within an affluent society. Empowering these groups, and raising an awareness of the contradictions they experience, is still at the core of our work and we should be the catalyst that facilitates positive social change in their lives. We should support them in critically questioning the taken for granted “common sense” that defines them negatively.

As an educator, Hall had a great gift. His academic writing was inspirational, but he also had the ability to put difficult ideas over in a way that students could relate to. Stuart Hall could deliver a lecture in a way that was accessible to students and he would always be around after tutorials, taking questions, valuing contributions and

firing enthusiasm. Although his work was deeply influential and he had become widely known, Stuart Hall had no arrogance; he had a strong desire to further knowledge, challenge injustice and support students and colleagues in understanding his vision of social change.

The learning materials written by Hall were brilliant and refreshingly innovative. His courses were ambitious and they were different to anything that had previously been offered in the world of academia. During the 80s, Hall's course "popular culture" introduced an analysis of everyday experience that ranged from soap operas and film through to youth sub-cultures and advertising. Students were sent to Blackpool to decode the popular pleasure of holidays and anyone who studied with him would never accept society unquestioningly again. Hall knew how to open a critical awareness in students. After studying his material, their first question would always be "in whose interests?" and their next would be "how can it be transformed" to make it equitable?

Many of us came into Community Education believing that we could change the world and we have not seen our visions of social change materialise. Should we be disheartened? Hall would definitely say no. He sought to understand individualism and managerialism whilst recognising their dangers. For Hall, Thatcherism was a shift that had occurred as ideas were articulated and rearticulated in response to ideological struggle at that point of history. However, for him the worst of times had the potential to shift towards better times because, when social divisions run deep, the contradictions between representation and reality also deepen and the potential for communities acting collectively for social change becomes greater.

Stuart Hall's ideas are, for me, at the core of Community Education. He believed in seeking to understand the world whilst facilitating social change, and he viewed theory as inherently linked to practice. He believed in education as the key to social change, education not just in formal institutions but also at the level of popular culture in the community. Hall believed that the role of the educator is to engage in a struggle against injustice whilst respecting people's "lived experience". For Community

Education, that translates into working with people “where they are at” whilst raising an awareness of the contradictions that are not in their interests.

Theoretically, Halls work will stand the test of time because he claimed that, even if the outcome is unclear, the struggle is always worthwhile if it tackles inequality and exclusion. Hall’s work theorises an unfinished revolution of ideas, a struggle against injustice where the end results cannot be predicted but the struggle must always be engaged with.

Goodbye Stuart Hall, social theorist, educator and visionary. Your vision of social change holds no definite promises but it holds out hope for a more equitable society. I believe that Community Education’s social purpose links closely to that vision.