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A Gramscian organic intellectual: Stuart Hall and British Cultural Studies in the age of Thatcher and Blair

Félix A. Jiménez Botta, Miyazaki International College

Abstract: This article explores the biography, intellectual influences, and political advocacy of the leading British cultural theorist Stuart Hall. The article elucidates the influence of two Marxist thinkers on Hall's thought, Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci. I first highlight the influence of Louis Althusser's structuralism and the concept of *interpellation* on Hall's critiques of British society in the 1970s. Then, I explain why Hall increasingly turned to Antonio Gramsci's unorthodox engagement with Marxism. The article argues that Gramscian concepts guided Hall's scholarly engagement with British politics and society and public advocacy until his death. The article is organized into three sections. The first part introduces Hall's background and his seminal contribution to the emergence of British cultural studies in the 1950s. The second part examines the ways in which Althusser and Gramsci influenced Hall in the 1960s-80s, and how he wielded their theories to critique British media and racism in the 1970s, and the Social Democratic consensus in the 1980s. The third section concludes with the organic intellectual Stuart Hall who deftly brandished Gramscian thought in his devastating critiques of Thatcherism and New Labour in the 1980s-90s.

After Stuart Hall's death at 82 in 2014, journalists and fellow scholars lauded him as an "intellectual giant," one of the "most significant intellectuals of our time," even "Godfather of multiculturalism" and, hyperbolically, "High Priest of the New Left."¹ A former professor at the Open University, Stuart Hall was one of the most visible and influential British public intellectuals, in spite of a migrant background and black skin in a society riven with inequality,

¹ Marcus Williamson, "Professor Stuart Hall: Sociologist and pioneer in the field of cultural studies whose work explored the concept of Britishness," *The Independent*, 11 February 2014. Geoff Eley, "Stuart Hall, 1932-2014," *History Workshop Journal*, Volume 79, Issue 1, (Spring 2015): 303-320. "'Godfather of multiculturalism' Stuart Hall dies aged 82," *The Guardian*, 10 February 2014. Matthew Reisz, "Scholars recall Stuart Hall, 'High priest of the New Left,'" *Times Higher Education* (February 14, 2010).

racism, and xenophobia. Hall wrote pioneering essays and collaborative volumes on media studies, race, cultural identity, diasporic culture, multiculturalism, and Thatcherism. Hall's scholarship redefined culture as a terrain of struggle. His theoretical concepts are invaluable tools for scholars working on exposing racism, gender discrimination, and neoliberal populism, all of which remain major challenges to contemporary society and politics in Britain and across the whole world. This article examines the intellectual debt that Stuart Hall owes to Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci, two unorthodox Marxist thinkers. After a period of intense engagement with Althusser, Hall turned decisively to Gramsci's work which guided Hall's intellectual path since the mid-1970s. Engagement with Gramsci was vital for Hall's scholarly work and political advocacy during the era of Thatcherism and New Labour.

I. The making of a diasporic organic intellectual

Born in British Jamaica in 1932, Hall was the offspring of a comfortable black middle-class family. As young boy, Hall felt the sting of racist discrimination which reached even inside his own home. Hall's mother, a light-skinned black Jamaican who looked to Britain as a beneficent motherland and as the repository of high culture, had internalized the inferiority complex instilled by positivist-inspired education from the Victorian Era. Her objection to her daughter's dating of a man she deemed to be "too black" triggered a family crisis, and in Hall's view, destroyed his sister's life. In short, Hall's 1951 arrival in Britain on an Oxford scholarship was to escape the psycho-social pressures of colonial society.² Akin to the great anticolonial

² Kuan-Hsing Chen and Stuart Hall, "The formation of a diasporic intellectual an interview with Stuart Hall by Kuan-Hsing Chen," in In Davis Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, eds., *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 488, 490.

figures such as Ho Chi Minh or Deng Xiaoping in the interwar period, Hall went abroad hoping to transform his country.³

Alongside fellow English-speaking Caribbean expatriates Hall reveled in the possibilities of independence. As he reminisced in an interview in the 1990s: “We followed the expulsion of the French from Indochina with a massive celebration dinner. We discovered, for the first time, that we were ‘West Indians’. We met African students for the first time. With the emerging postcolonial independence, we dreamt of a Caribbean federation, merging these countries into a larger entity.”⁴ Unlike most of his peers, however, Hall stayed in Britain and became a “diasporic intellectual,” or a “familiar stranger” as theorized by the German sociologist Georg Simmel. Hall became someone who knew England from the inside, but never countenanced becoming truly “English.”⁵ Hall’s conscious refusal to adopt an English national identity was tied with his growing left-wing politics and his cosmopolitanism. His peers at Oxford were independent leftist intellectuals such as Perry Anderson, Charles Taylor, and Raphael Samuel. Most were working-class, Scottish, Irish, or foreign like Hall. They did not fit with the usual Oxford student: male, wealthy, educated at expensive private colleges such as Eton or Harrow, experienced in military drills, and Tory.⁶

Hall’s intellectual and political trajectory took a major turn in 1956. That year Britain, France, and Israel invaded Egypt to seize the Suez Canal, while the Soviet Red Army assaulted Hungary to crush Hungarian leader Imre Nagy’s attempt to democratize the Communist Party. Hall identified with the Egyptians and the Hungarians whom he saw as victims of imperialism.

³ See Michael Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Nationalism*. Global and International History (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁴ Chen and Hall, “The formation of a diasporic intellectual,” 494.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 492.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 495.

Unlike other western intellectuals who responded to the Hungarian crisis by renouncing Marxism, Hall embraced it. In doing so, he was accompanied by students, intellectuals, and activists who comprised the New Left. New Leftists rejected Western Imperialism, Soviet Stalinism, and the stuffy reformism of Social Democratic parties alike. Their anger was not just directed at conservative imperialists in France and Britain who wanted to maintain their empires at all costs by fighting blood counterinsurgent struggles in Malaysia and Vietnam, Kenya or Algeria. They were also angry at Old Leftists from the French Communist Party (Parti Communiste Français, PCF), which abandoned its earlier anti-imperialism to support the maintenance of the French empire in Indochina and North Africa.⁷ Moreover, they rejected the British Labour or the West German Social Democrats, whose eager divestment from previous radical impulses struck New Leftists as stuffy reformism.⁸

Hall's conscious embrace of a critical Marxism led to a series of collaborative intellectual and activist projects. The most important were the journal *Universities and Left Review* and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). In the *Universities and Left Review* Hall, Taylor, and Samuel broached topics that older Marxists had not considered important at all: popular culture, and the role of new mass media such as television in creating political consensus. In 1960, *Universities and Left Review* merged with another left-wing journal, *The New Reasoner*, to become the influential journal *New Left Review*.⁹

⁷ "The Communists and the Colonized. The French Communist Party left a checkered record on anti-imperialism. An Interview with Selim Nadi," *Jacobin Magazine*, 29 October 2016.

⁸ Terence Renaud, *New Lefts: The Making of a Radical Tradition* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2021), 206–7.

⁹ Kuan-Hsing Chen and Stuart Hall, "The formation of a diasporic intellectual," In Morley and Chen, eds., *Stuart Hall*, 500.

In 1964, Hall joined the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) as a Research Fellow. Founded that same year by Richard Hoggart, Professor of English at the University of Birmingham, the original goal of the CCCS was to move cultural studies beyond traditional highbrow approaches to culture. Until the 1960s, the dominant form of cultural criticism belonged to scholars such as F.R. Leavis whose intellectual project was to distinguish between high culture in the form of canonical texts of great writers such as William Shakespeare or Leon Tolstoy, from “inferior” forms of literature or novel cultural forms such as television or popular music.¹⁰ Hoggart’s major work *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life* (1957) had fundamentally challenged Leavis’ elitist approach.¹¹

Impressed by Hall’s contributions to *Universities and Left Review* and *New Left Review* Hoggart invited him to join. Hoggart’s tenure lasted five years. His dual role as Professor of English and corresponding administrative roles at the university, proved incompatible with the restlessness of CCCS students who fully embraced the revolutionary energies of the year 1968.¹² In that year, university students across the world went on the streets against a variety of issues ranging from the Vietnam War, domestic authoritarianism, undemocratic governance at universities, authoritarian professors, gender discrimination, and racism. Hoggart went to work for UNESCO.¹³

Hall, whose sympathies lay clearly with the students, became the new director. He helped impulse the development of working groups who workshopped texts cooperatively to avoid

¹⁰ David Rowe, “Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies,” in Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social Theory, edited by Bryan S. Turner (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), 1. F.R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1948).

¹¹ Rowe, “Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies,” 3.

¹² Sparks, “Stuart Hall, Cultural studies and Marxism,” 80.

¹³ Kuan-Hsing Chen and Stuart Hall, “The formation of a diasporic intellectual,” 501.

individualistic assessments that did not reflect the CCCS's collective approach. During Hall's tenure, the CCCS produced high-quality contributions such as *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain* (1976), *On Ideology* (1978), *Women Take Issue: Aspects of Women's Subordination* (1978), *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (1978), *Culture, Media, Language* (1980).¹⁴ As will be explored later in this article, these collaborative works contained many of Hall's original contributions that he developed from his engagement with Althusserian structuralism and increasingly, Gramscian Marxism.

Hall's time as CCCS director was also fraught. Throughout the 1970s, he had to contend with growing enmity by the university and from traditionalists at the department of Sociology towards the critical intellectual approach pioneered at the CCCS. Criticism also came from the left. In a public lecture hosted at the Centre in 1979, the historian E.P. Thompson, author of the influential book *The Making of the English Working Class* (1964), publicly and vitriolically attacked the CCCS' approach as "theoretical terrorism." For E.P. Thompson, cultural criticism prized theory above evidence and historical materialism. The rift between E.P. Thompson and the CCCS once more showed the rift between the "old" left and the 60s New Left.¹⁵ Finally, radical revolutionaries and insurgent feminists within the CCCS attacked Hall as a "father figure." As Connell and Hilton have put it "the CCCS in general and Stuart Hall in particular struggled to reconcile a commitment to the politics of 1968 with the politics of hierarchy and leadership."¹⁶

A combination of dejection and a feeling that his work at the CCCS was done, Hall departed for the Open University in 1979. It was only six months after Margaret Thatcher's

¹⁴ Rowe, "Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies," 3.

¹⁵ Kieran Connell and Matthew Hilton, "The Working Practices of Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies," *Social History* 40, no. 3 (2015): 301.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 302-307, cit. on 301.

landslide victory. The 1980s–90s proved to be as intellectually productive as they were politically disappointing. Hall reckoned with Thatcherism and New Labour. His seminal essays “The Great Moving Right Show” and the “The Great Moving Nowhere Show,” or his 1988 manual for left-wing strategy *Thatcherism and Politics of Renewal* quickly became common sense amongst left-wing intellectuals and activists.¹⁷ Hall’s incisive critiques of Thatcher and later Blair, and the style in which he formulated them, can be best understood as a result from his engagement with Louis Althusser’s Marxist structuralism, and especially with Antonio Gramsci’s unorthodox Marxist approach to social analysis.

II. Wrestling with Marxism: Stuart Hall’s engagement with Althusser and Gramsci

His time as contributor and, from 1958–61 as main editor, of the *Universities and Left Review* and later the *New Left Review* was profoundly influential for Hall. During those years he realized that Marxism as practiced at that time was highly reductionist. In a 1958 article, Hall openly criticized the Marxist metaphor of base and superstructure. Marx had separated, artificially in Hall’s view, the base, that referred to economic production (workers, bourgeoisie, capitalists, means of production, etc.), and the superstructure that comprised everything else, from family and religion to art and media. Marx claimed that the superstructure was merely ancillary to economic production.¹⁸ What is more, Marx’s writings were silent on the phenomena

¹⁷ Sally Davidson, David Featherstone, Michel Rustin, and Bill Schwartz, “Introduction: Redefining the Political,” in Stuart Hall, Sally Davison, David Featherstone, Michael Rustin, Bill Schwarz, eds., *Selected Political Writings: The Great Moving Right Show and Other Essays*. Stuart Hall, Selected Writings (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 10.

¹⁸ Stuart Hall, “A sense of classlessness,” *Universities and Left Review*, 1(5) (Autumn 1958): 26–32.

that Hall and the New Leftists were most interested in: culture, ideology, language, and the power of symbols. Despite their importance these concepts remained under-theorized.¹⁹

Moreover, Hall found that his contemporaries did not problematize Marxism's inherent eurocentrism. Marx's analysis of capitalism is based on a Western European model, where it developed from within, as opposed to regions where capitalism was brought from without, embedded in coercive power structures that were political, racial, and cultural. European Marxists made models for social transformation that were billed as universally applicable but ignored heterogenous factors beyond economics.²⁰ A case in point was the British working class. Hall found that traditional Marxism did not have an accurate picture of actual workers in the 1950s. British workers were not the unskilled and immiserated class that Marx wrote would gain consciousness and overthrow the bourgeoisie. Instead, as beneficiaries from upward mobility, secure jobs, and the welfare state, they tended to see themselves as part of the system, not against it. British workers also privileged their interests over those of other oppressed classes, most prominently migrants from the West Indies. This made their participation in a revolutionary upheaval not only unlikely, but they were also prone to fall prey to the forces of reaction through the power of mass media.²¹

Thus, it bears explanation for why, given the profound limitations that he found in classical Marxism, Hall ended up a Marxist after all. Young radicals like Hall perceived advanced capitalist and state socialist societies as ossified. The tools they found to critique these societies came from their re-reading of Marx's classical writings, and the texts of other Marxist theorists.

¹⁹ Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies and its theoretical legacies," 261-2.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 264.

²¹ Davis, Helen. *Understanding Stuart Hall* (London and Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE Publications, 2004), 102-103.

Chief amongst them were Vladimir Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, Antonio Gramsci, Herbert Marcuse and other Frankfurt School thinkers, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Louis Althusser. It was this body of Western Marxist Thought that inspired New Leftists, and not the reductive economism of the Second International version of Marxism from 1889, that had then become the intellectual foundation for Real Existing Socialism in the Communist Bloc after 1945.²² Western Marxism combined a fundamental challenge to capitalism, state-socialism, and imperialism, with an uncompromising stance against political reformism, and a commitment to revolutionary transformation from the bottom up. It offered a totalizing coherence to historical processes that helped make sense of a seemingly chaotic and disjointed world, and a path forward despite it all.²³

During his first years at the CCCS, Hall, his colleagues, and students “walked right around the entire circumference of European thought, in order not to be in any simple capitulation to the *zeitgeist*, Marxists.” This involved reading German idealist philosophy, especially Hegel, and the critical thought of German sociologist Max Weber.²⁴ Hall, his colleagues, and his students at the CCCS would eventually take the plunge into Marxism because of two reasons: The 1968 student protests, and the thought of Louis Althusser (b. 1918 – d. 1990).

At first sight, Althusser is an unlikely influence for Stuart Hall. Althusser was a loyal member of the Stalinist French Communist Party. Until 1965, he defended state-socialist orthodoxy from idealist critics such as Georgy Lukacs and the Frankfurt School. His critiques of fellow Western Marxists were made with such vehemence that some scholars have excluded him

²² See Renaud, *New Lefts*, and Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950*. Weimar and Now 10. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

²³ See Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley: Univ. of Calif. Pr, 1984).

²⁴ Hall, “Cultural Studies and its theoretical legacies,” 265.

from the western Marxist cannon. Martin Jay, however, has made a strong case for his inclusion because Althusser's structuralist approach led to the development of a sophisticated concept of ideology and reworking the Marxist concept of ideology.²⁵

Althusser's innovation was to introduce the notion of structuralism to Marxism. In traditional Marxist thought, the conditions for a social transformation lay in the economic alienation of the working class which led to the development of class consciousness and then to a revolutionary overthrow of the ruling class. Therefore, for traditional Marxism the major obstacle for the revolution was the slow development of class consciousness, the strength of false consciousness, and the power of the ruling classes. Althusser's work showed that there was another major obstacle: an anti-revolutionary structure conformed of "ideological state apparatuses" (institutions such as the police, the courts, governments, schools, etc.) guided by a ruling anti-revolutionary ideology (property rights, anti-communism, nationalism, etc.). This structure compelled individuals to conform by hailing, or in Althusser's words: *interpellating*, them as subjects into the system.²⁶

We can clearly see Althusser's influence in Hall's 1974 essay "Black Men, White Media." Hall argued that there was a fundamental problem in the way that Black migrants were portrayed in British mass media. Television appearances by people of African descent, Hall claimed, were always encased within the framework of "immigrant problems." They were either portrayed as a burden for a mainstream society conceptualized as inherently white, or as dangerous radicals advocating for black power. Blacks were never allowed to formulate the framework of the discussion. Even an openly racist politician such as Enoch Powell was presented as being the

²⁵ Jay, *Marxism and Totality*, 388–91.

²⁶ Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, edited by Louis Althusser (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 127–88.

recipient of the black “problem,” instead of black Britons being the recipients of Powell’s racist vitriol. The answer, according to Hall, lay in the inner structure of mass media: “Broadly speaking, the media exists in a very close, sympathetic relationship to power and established values. They favour a consensus view of any problem: they reflect overwhelmingly middle-class attitudes and experience.” Moreover, “the media are defensive about the sacred institutions of society...parliamentary legislation, local government, law and order, the police.”²⁷

True to Althusserian form, Hall attacked the ideology-forming institution of the media for being a poor representative for the views of Black Britons for three reasons. Black Britons were overwhelmingly skilled and semi-skilled working-class. Secondly, given a pervasive lack of access to education, Black Britons were mostly un-articulate and lacked organized viewpoints. Finally, black people in Britain were most likely to encounter problems in their interactions with said institutions. Hall demanded from British media to become more representative of the ordinary men and women who lived and worked in Britain. “Blacks are not puppets attached by strings to some set of issues defined as “black problems” ... they have a right to access when these questions are being discussed.”²⁸

In the mid-1970s Hall came under the spell of another Marxist thinker, Antonio Gramsci (b. 1891 d. 1937) during the revival of Gramsci studies that followed the 1971 publication of the *Prison Notebooks* by Quintin Hoare and Quentin Nowell-Smith.²⁹ Hall found in Gramsci an array of theoretical tools that largely displaced his earlier interest in Althusser. Even more than in Althusser- himself very influenced by Gramsci- the Italian Marxist gave a lasting contribution

²⁷ Stuart Hall, “Black Men, White Media,” [1974] in Gilroy, Paul, and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, eds. *Stuart Hall: Selected Writings On Race and Difference* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2021), 52-53.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

²⁹ Joseph A. Buttigieg, “Gramsci in English,” *International Gramsci Journal*, 3(1), (2018): 26-40.

to cultural studies with his non-reductive approach to Marxism, and his insistence on the role of organic intellectuals.

As with Althusser, Hall's infatuation with Antonio Gramsci requires explanation. Gramsci's main body of work, the *Prison Notebooks*, emerged under the immense duress of his confinement under Benito Mussolini's fascist regime from 1928 to 1935. Gramsci's writings are scattered and fragmentary. He wrote in roundabout ways to side-skirt fascist censorship. Moreover, Gramsci's analytical insights were always grounded in the time and context of early twentieth century Italy, which required, in Hall's words, "considerable care and patience ... to be delicately dis-interred from their concrete and specific historical embeddedness and transplanted to new soil."³⁰ Finally, Gramsci remained thoroughly centered on Italian politics and society, which prompted the Marxist intellectual Perry Anderson, Hall's erstwhile collaborator at *New Left Review*, to question his use for postcolonial studies because he was a Western Marxist who had little value for understanding the problems of the Global South.³¹

Hall rejected dismissals of Gramsci of this kind as an error of literalism, which overlooked the very valuable contributions of Gramscian thought beyond their Italian context. Hall became interested in the Sardinia-born Gramsci precisely because he came from the periphery of the Italian nation, just as Hall came from the periphery of the British Empire. Gramsci's Sardinian background made him especially attentive to "the crosscutting relations of regional, cultural, and national difference," and to the asymmetrical speed of development between northern and southern Italy, and between the mainland and the island of Sardinia. Even as he rose to head of the Italian Communist Party in 1924, after years of propelling the organized

³⁰ Hall, "Gramsci's Relevance for the study of race and ethnicity," 413.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 416.

labor movement in the city of Turin, Gramsci never lost his keen awareness of difference and diversity.³²

Hall appreciated Gramsci's analysis of Italian society because it disavowed the reductionist economism from the Second International, which had become orthodoxy in the Soviet Union with Nikolai Bukharin's *Theory of Historical Materialism: A Manual of Popular Sociology* (1921). Under this reductive economism, the economic "base" determined the cultural "superstructure" in an unilinear fashion. Thus, the goal of the "superstructure" is always to justify the operations of the economic "base" that comprises the means and relations of capitalist production. The "superstructure" is thus reduced to a tool of the economic elites to buttress their own power. According to this model, laborers who did not show solidarity with other workers suffered from "false consciousness" derived from capitalist culture. The concepts of "base and superstructure" advanced by the Second International and Bukharin were shorn of Marx's original complexity, such as the role of the dialectic in the making of the superstructure, to favor a more easily actionable strategy of revolution. Gramsci rebuffed this reductionist understanding of culture with his original concept of "hegemony." Gramscian hegemony proved eminently influential for Hall and many other scholars as it opened the space for culture, human subjectivity, and contingency in the making of history.³³

Gramsci understood that classes, for example the working class or the bourgeois class, were riven by conflicting interests, e.g. workers are divided by questions of nation and race;

³² Ibid., 416-17.

³³ Ibid., 420–21. On Marx's original definition see Karl Marx, "Preface" in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. With some notes by R. Rojas. (Moscow Progress Publishers, 1977 [1859]) <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm>. Antonio Gramsci, "Critical Notes on an Attempt at Popular Sociology," in *Selections from The Prison Notebooks*. Edited and translated by Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (Lawrence & Wishart London 1971), 769–777.

capitalists are divided by competition and the search for monopoly. Therefore, class unity was something that had to be created. This happened in three main stages. First, there was an ‘economic corporate’ stage, in which workers, professionals, or industrialists recognized that they had basic common interests, but did not yet develop ties of solidarity. The second stage, the ‘class corporate’ stage is when these actors started to develop solidarity ties, which were limited to the economic field. Finally, came the “hegemonic” stage, during which economic solidarity would broaden into a political alliance, followed by an intellectual and moral ideology that cemented this alliance, making it “organic,” and facilitating others to buy into it. This level of unity gave that social group a tremendous amount of power because it could dictate the framework in which culture develops. Because of historical developments, the bourgeois class had become the hegemonic class, and capitalism the hegemonic ideology since the early 19th century.³⁴

For Gramsci, the concept of hegemony explained why many Italian workers supported the capitalist class, were swayed by the Catholic Church, and voted for nationalist political parties, even though all worked against working class interests. The hegemonic process, however, could not be interpreted as absolute. Hegemony was achieved when the “common sense” of the times reflected hegemonic ideology. The mastery of the hegemonic class was founded on popular consent, on the widespread purchase of its ideology, not on authoritarianism or naked force. The key to the strength of hegemony was the strength of a civil society that accepted it. This was the key to its success, but it was also the path to overturn it. Gramsci believed that the violent transformation occurring in the Soviet Union under Josef Stalin was unpracticable in western Europe because of its strong civil society and institutions. If left-wing ideas became hegemonic, Gramsci argued, then the revolution could be achieved in a more peaceful and lasting way. The

³⁴ Hall, “Gramsci’s Relevance,” 423-24.

path to left-wing hegemony is rocky in Gramscian analysis. He argued that there would most likely be no violent revolution, no “Winter Palace moment,” in western European countries. Instead, creating left-wing hegemony required slow, persistent work by dedicated “organic intellectuals” that would wage a non-violent “war of position” against right-wing hegemony.³⁵

Besides the concept of hegemony, Gramsci’s idea of the organic intellectual proved enormously influential for Stuart Hall. Gramsci differentiated between traditional intellectuals who remained wedded to objectivity and stayed put in their ivory towers, and organic intellectuals who emerged from a particular class and articulated their concerns through their scholarship and public activism. Hall, a black intellectual from Jamaica who had made the former colonial metropole his home, saw himself as a public intellectual of the immigrant community, and within it, black workers. This was precisely what he understood his work at the CCCS to be. In Hall’s own words, “there is no doubt in my mind that we were trying to find an institutional practice in cultural studies that might produce an organic intellectual.”³⁶ Yet, he found himself in a quandary. The University of Birmingham was an ivory tower, a place unreachable to the class that Hall advocated for. According to Gramsci, “the organic intellectual cannot absolve himself or herself from the responsibility of transmitting [their] ideas, [their] knowledge, through the intellectual function, to those who do not belong, professionally, in the intellectual class.”³⁷ It was this engagement with Gramsci which prompted him to opt for teaching at the Open University from 1979 onwards.

Founded in 1969, with the support of the Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson, the Open University was made available to all people interested in learning for a small fraction of

³⁵ Hall, “Gramsci’s Relevance,” 428.

³⁶ Hall, “Cultural Studies and its theoretical legacies,” 266.

³⁷ Hall, “Cultural Studies and its theoretical legacies,” 267.

the cost of established universities. The Open University was conceived as the opposite of an ivory tower, a university open to non-academics interested in broadening their perspectives. In an interview Hall recalled that he saw the “more open, interdisciplinary, unconventional setting [of the Open University]” as the best place to bring the high-flying ideas developed at the CCCS down to earth, “to those who don’t have any academic background.” This was the very idea of an organic intellectual. As Hall puts it: “If you are going to make cultural studies [popular], you have to translate the ideas, be willing to write at *that* more popular and accessible level. I wanted cultural studies to be open to that sort of challenge” (*Italics in the original*).³⁸

III. The organic intellectual in action: Reckoning with Thatcherism and New Labour, 1980s-1990s.

On Friday, 4 May 1979, the new British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher celebrated her party’s landslide victory over Labour. She did it in typical Thatcherite fashion, pontificating against her political foes in a hectoring voice and patronizing tone. She also read from the Catholic Saint Francis of Assisi to the cameras installed in front of her new residence at 10 Downing Street: “Where there is discord, may we bring harmony. Where there is error, may we bring truth. Where there is doubt, may we bring faith. And where there is despair, may we bring hope.”³⁹

Her victory came on the coattails of the “Winter of Discontent” of 1978-79 in which Labor Unions clashed with the government leading many to think of Britain as “ungovernable.” The 1970s had witnessed a further deterioration of the economic situation engendered by Britain’s relatively weak economic development since 1945, the oil shocks of the 1970s, and the

³⁸ Chen and Hall, “Interview with Stuart Hall: The Formation of a Diasporic Intellectual,” 503.

³⁹ Cited Andy McSmith, *No Such Thing as Society: A History of Britain in the 1980s* (London: Constable, 2011), 11.

growing gulf between the interests of unionized workers and their employers. The conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath (1970-1974) and his Labour Party counterparts Harold Wilson (1964-70, 1974-76) and James Callaghan (1976-1979) had all failed to resolve the crisis. Thatcher promised a radically different approach.

Over the next ten years, British people would soon get used to Thatcher's messianic vision, brought to them in simple terms most could understand. For Thatcher, the welfare state that the social-democratic Labour Party had established since 1945, and which conservatives had upheld, was the original error. This error had been responsible for the discord, doubt, and despair that afflicted the country in the 1970s. Thatcher and the Conservative Party promised to bring back truth, faith, and hope, and especially harmony to a supposedly afflicted nation. Her message was simple. Collectivism had brought decline to Britain; free market capitalism would solve the nation's problems.⁴⁰ Her bombastic style led many to underestimate her. For example, the well-known Labour politician, now ex-Minister Tony Benn, believed that his time in the opposition would be short, and therefore he planned to "enjoy" it and "take full advantage of it," just as one would a vacation.⁴¹ The Labour Party would not gain power again almost twenty years later, and then it would hold views wholly unacceptable to Benn.

Stuart Hall quickly grasped that *Thatcherism*, a term he coined himself, was a very different phenomenon from the conservative movements that had come and gone in the years prior. Whereas Benn dismissed Thatcher as a temporary episode, Hall saw the making of an authoritarian populism that was gaining ground with the main constituents of the Labour Party. Thatcher's message was popular because, in perfect populist fashion, Thatcher smoothed over

⁴⁰ Hall, "The Great Moving Right Show," in Hall, et.al., *Selected Political Writings*, 180. More generally see Ben Jackson and Robert Saunders, eds. *Making Thatcher's Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁴¹ McSmith, *No Such Thing as Society*, 12.

economic disparities and class conflicts with a narrative of self-empowerment.⁴² Hall understood Thatcher in Gramscian terms. He saw in her ideology and her electoral success the making of a new right-wing hegemony. This put Hall at odds with the wider British left, which largely stuck to Benn's dismissive attitude.⁴³

It is easy to see why much of the left was hostile to Hall's analysis. Whereas they saw the achievements of the past forty years as a good to be defended, Hall offered a healthy dose of self-criticism. In his seminal article, "The Great Moving Right Show," published in the journal *Marxism Today*, Hall argued that the growing success of Thatcherism was due to contradictions intrinsic to the social democratic consensus. According to Hall, the Labour Party and Keynesian conservatives had created an image of the state as the benefactor of the people through the creation of the welfare state. This welfare state, however, was "increasingly encountered and experienced by ordinary working people as, indeed, not a beneficiary but a powerful, bureaucratic imposition."⁴⁴

Thatcher was able to point to the long lines to receive unemployment payments, or the long waits at the National Health Service as the failure of this interventionist welfare state. Hall understood that Thatcher's genius was to present herself on the side of the people, as the solution, and conversely, to present the Labour Party as the quintessential political insider, as the government and against the people.⁴⁵ In another influential article, Hall added that "neo-Keynesian demands of management, corporatist politics and the disciplining of working-class demands through incomes policy – is deeply discredited."⁴⁶ In another, he called the state

⁴² Hall, "The Great Moving Right Show," 185.

⁴³ Davis, *Understanding Stuart Hall*, 134-38.

⁴⁴ Hall, "The Great Moving Right Show," in Hall, et.al., *Selected Political Writings*, 180.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 181.

⁴⁶ Hall, "The Little Caesars of Social Democracy," in Hall, et.al., *Selected Political Writings*, 189.

“socialism’s old caretaker,” and argued for a rethinking of socialism that went beyond reliance on the state.⁴⁷ Hall presciently intimated that the social democratic consensus had crumbled because of its internal contradictions, and that Thatcher’s success was rooted in her ability to present herself as the only solution. Whereas the left sought to oppose all things Thatcher, Hall argued that they better learn something from her.⁴⁸

Another side of Thatcher’s “war of position” against the social democratic consensus, which Hall recognized, was its insistence on lambasting prior government for allegedly failing to secure law and order, and for allowing too many immigrants to Great Britain. Thatcherism thrived on the “moral panic” of inner-city mugging and violence that had characterized conservative rhetoric throughout the 1970s. The mediatic and social responses to the deviant act of petty theft by impoverished black men had been the subject of a major work dating from Hall’s days at the CCCS, *Policing the Crisis* (1978). In it, Hall et.al. had argued that the intense scrutiny given to these deviant acts, did not aim at combatting the social roots of petty theft, for instance unemployment and lack of educational access. Instead, the mediatic response had helped nurture a common sense that favored a harsh police crackdown.⁴⁹ In other words, Hall charged social democratic Britain with having excluded black workers, which had then helped facilitate the conditions that Thatcherism capitalized on for garnering working class support.⁵⁰

Throughout the 1980s, Hall urged the left to understand the phenomenon of Thatcherism for what it was, often without success. Even after landslide defeats in 1983 and 1987, the Labour leadership and the trade unions failed to comprehend how dire a state they

⁴⁷ Hall, “The State: Socialism’s Old Caretaker,” in Hall, et.al., *Selected Political Writings*, 237.

⁴⁸ On this account Hall is at odds with David Harvey’s influential account of the rise of neoliberalism. See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁴⁹ Davis, *Understanding Stuart Hall*, 106–7.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 122–23.

found themselves in. By now, Thatcherism had achieved hegemony, and would “continue to set the terms, define the parameters, establish the benchmark of ‘political reality’ in Britain. Hall pointed to the key years of 1975–79 as the time when politics as usual had been destroyed. Instead of Labour’s bungling efforts to master the crisis, “she [Thatcher] engineered the fatal coupling of the anti-Labourist, anti-statist, anti-equality, anti-welfare spirit with the revitalised gospel of the free market.” An alternative social philosophy had been born: “Thatcherism,” combining “organic national patriotism, religion of the free market, competitive individualism in economic matters, authoritarian state in social and political affairs.”⁵¹

Hall charged that instead of taking Gramsci seriously and combining forces to create a new hegemony, the Labour chief, Michael Kinnock, and trade union leaders such as Arthur Scargill remained stuck in the good ol’ boys’ politics of traditional trade unionism. They failed to recognize the importance of broadening the struggle to include new social movements such as feminism.⁵² Indeed, the collusion of Labour politicians with the right-wing campaign against the ‘loony left’, and Kinnock’s “manly, ‘likely lad’” image, “carried no echo or trace of feminist struggles over two decades.”⁵³

In an assessment that rings true even today, considering the catastrophic performance by Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn in the 2019 general elections, Hall explained that the party’s conservative campaign promises: to bring back the welfare state, to strengthen the working class, and to restore state ownership of key industries; were not sufficiently popular to bring majorities. Too many people had never belonged to the traditional working class, and not all workers were Labour supporters. To defeat the conservatives, Labour needed to present itself as

⁵¹ Hall, “The Crisis of Labourism,” in Hall, et.al., *Selected Political Writings*, 210.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 209.

⁵³ Hall, “Blue election, election blues,” in Hall, et.al., *Selected Political Writings*, 243.

a viable alternative, but it “cannot build such an alternative by, however honourably, replaying ‘1945’ in 1987.” It needed to move forward with a strategy “for modernisation and an image of modernity.”⁵⁴

In the 1990s, the Labour found a strategy for modernization, but it would be far from the modernization that Hall had called for. Spearheaded by the young politicians Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, the Labour party underwent a radical transformation after 1987, shedding its commitment to trade unionism, state ownership of the means of production, and even the welfare state. Blair’s political goals were masterfully ambiguous: to “build a strong society which gives each citizen the potential to develop to the full.” The Labour Party that won the elections in 1997 with Blair as Prime Minister even called itself “New Labour.”⁵⁵

Hall was intensely critical of New Labour’s political ideology which he saw as updating, but never challenging, neoliberal common sense. The undercutting of the welfare state under the label of reform was, for Hall, especially egregious for a party that claimed to be following in the footsteps of the wartime architect of the welfare state, William Beveridge. Hall could not see how New Labour was any different from Thatcherism. Blair’s contempt for the “work-shy,” his penchant for privatization, and the imposition of these neoliberal views on the Labour faithful, made him less an alternative and more a continuation of Thatcherite policies. In one article Hall wrote with his collaborator Martin Jacques, he called New Labour “Thatcherism with a human face” which earned him the enmity of New Labour’s intellectual supporters. Hall was undeterred. Trenchantly, he concluded that New Labour may not be “the

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 246–47.

⁵⁵ Tony Blair, “Socialism,” Fabian Pamphlet 565 (London: Fabian Society, 1994), 7. James E. Cronin, *New Labour’s Pasts: The Labour Party and Its Discontents*. 1st ed. Harlow, England and New York: Pearson/Longman, 2004.

populism of Mrs. Thatcher’s neoliberal right... but it is a variant species of ‘authoritarian populism’ none the less – corporate and managerialist in its ‘downward’ leadership style and its moralising attitude to those to whom good is being done.’⁵⁶

Hall went at work to unravel the ideological trappings of New Labour ideology. For instance, one of Blair’s favorite quips was that globalization had made it impossible for a government to manage the economy. Change was inevitable, and that all that a government could possibly do was to “manage change.” Rather than attempting to cushion Britain’s workers from external change, however, New Labour’s agenda seemed entirely different: “His response is to ‘manage change’. But it seems that what he [Blair] really means is that we must ‘manage ourselves to adapt to changes which we cannot otherwise control.’”⁵⁷ New Labour was a free-for-all, no holds barred opening of the economy to globalization without care for the long-term consequences.

Conclusion

Hall’s engagement with New Labour and the conservative governments that have succeeded it lasted until his death in 2014. He remained engaged in the making of the anti-neoliberal Kilburn Manifesto, which was published posthumously in 2015.⁵⁸ Throughout his career, Hall remained an engaged scholar who never wavered in his commitment to bringing his insights to the population at large. This article has analyzed Hall’s biography and the emergence of cultural studies from a critical standpoint towards Marxism. The very same intellectual curiosity that led him to reject the reductive lures of Marxist economism led Hall to

⁵⁶ Hall, “The Great Moving Nowhere Show,” in Hall, et.al., *Selected Political Writings*, 295–6.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 289.

⁵⁸ Stuart Hall, Doreen Massey and Michael Rustin, eds., *After Neoliberalism? The Kilburn Manifesto*. A Soundings Collection. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2015).

a productive intellectual engagement with critical Marxists Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci. Whereas Althusser opened his eyes to a non-reductive Marxism, Gramsci taught Hall about the concept of hegemony and the organic intellectual, naming an individual which Hall could recognize himself in. Better than most, Hall understood that value of structural thinking, ideology, and hegemony to understand British society. Better than most, Hall was able to translate his difficult theories into a language that most people could understand. For these reasons alone, Hall's scholarship remains a sure guide to present global challenges that deserves a wide readership.