

**The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies: 50 Years On (CCCS50)  
Conference: Birmingham University, June 2014**

*'A pop-up occupation?' (Richard Johnson)*

Apart from the two large screens behind the panel's table, it could have been 1964: the unreconstructed lecture theatre, the assortment of assembled academics and the old school modes of address offered two days of retrospective immersion in the home of CCCS. This was, inevitably given events in the months prior to the event, an intense, emotive foray into the past as well as an invocation to those present to not only celebrate the Centre's 50 years of influence by visiting the companion exhibition (at the Midlands Arts Centre nearby) and meticulously curated CCCS Archive (within the University - controversially for some), but also to question its impact and purpose.

From its inception under Richard Hoggart in 1964, and subsequently under Stuart Hall, both recently deceased, the Centre had attracted those students with an intellectual curiosity about the *now*, wishing to work both with and against the grain in terms of researching popular cultural forms. These outliers gravitated towards a seemingly inchoate, anarchic department with what to others may have seemed like an odd interest in the flux of social formation.

Perhaps fuelled by the emotional charge ignited by the timing – the foreword for the exhibition guide is written by Stuart Hall, looking forward to the event and remembering the introduction from Richard Hoggart to join the project – the venue, for both conference and archive, was a site (literally) of dissensus. Ann Gray reflected on the removal of the working papers from the Muirhead Tower. The imposing symbol, depicted in Sarah Taylor Silverwood's image in the exhibition, 'echoes the Centre's subversive approach, in terms of its architectural representation, graphically, typographically, academically, financially, even' (CCCS50, 2014: 56). Birmingham's celebration of the anniversary is, both Gray and Johnson suggest, highly selective, the institution having attempted previously to 'airbrush CCCS from history', adopting a callous approach to people, being cavalier with the truth. For these reasons, the audience were encouraged to see the event as an ironic celebration of a 'dark stain' on the history of the institution.

Research at the Centre ruptured traditional university mores by embracing: non-hierarchical and innovative approaches to pedagogy; unflinching political critique; commitment to local and global dialogue and interdisciplinary engagement within the academy, all of which constituted Cultural Studies' unique strength as much as its institutional fragility. These indeterminate and interlocking dimensions formed the backbone of panel discussion at the conference.

Present were a cross-section of former tutors and alumni, including Richard Johnson, Ann Gray, Geoff Ely, John Clark, Paul Gilroy, David Morley, Jackie Stacey, Iain Chambers, Mikko Lehtonen, Larry Grossberg, Angela McRobbie, Dick Hebdige, Dorothy Hobson and Isaac Julien, to name but a few. Stuart Hall's absence lent a melancholic tone to much of the proceedings, though his towering presence was felt throughout. There was a screening of John Akomfrah's 2013 documentary *The Stuart Hall Project*; a poignant interview with Hall at his home a few months before he died, conducted by the CCCS archivist Kieran Connell; and a beautifully produced film piece from Isaac Julien – *Kapital* (2014) - featuring Hall's characteristically modest and eloquent response to David Harvey's account of the 'ungraspable' affective

power of new capitalism. Hall claimed that CS needed to rethink the orientation of its struggle, suggesting that tilling old articulations of the working class was a futile exercise in a fragmented society. CS needed to regroup and work harder, to push further and find ways of re-articulating not only marginal social groups' identities but also its values and *raison d'être*.

Indeed Hall's departure from the CCCS relates to the issue of reinvention. One dimension of the Centre's project which had eluded Hall's intellectual embrace was feminism and he conceded that this had been an error of judgement. One delegate at the conference, Gitanjali Pyndiah, a PhD student in Cultural Studies at Goldsmiths, picked up on this point in her blog post, quoting a key moment of reflexivity during the Hall-Connell interview :

I made a very serious mistake... I said "Feminism had broken in like a thief in the night" ...But that terrible trip of the tongue ... just told me that, "You are finding this very difficult. You are finding this VERY difficult [and] when it comes to authority and power, you are not as transformed as you think you are or as you ought to be.

[Retrieved from: <http://www.rowmaninternational.com/?p=2900&preview=true>  
Accessed 4 August 2014]

His view was that no man could ever be a feminist and that this was an insurmountable failing. Such an admission seems to put the lie to Matthew Hilton's surprise proposal, in relation to debates around the future of the discipline, that in fact CS could be perceived to have 'won'. He was speaking in terms of the discipline's global reach and its introduction of interdisciplinary behaviours in higher education. Surely Hall would contest the concept of 'winning', as did many of the delegates, in light of CS's protean and elusive qualities. Its object of study, the current socio-political and historical conjuncture, is always on the move, faster even than its most ardent adherents. It is not a question of winning the political struggle but of constant critical engagement with the holders of power, with the transitional and the interstitial, and of wrestling with the new common sense of the age. Hall's portrayal of feminism as 'a welcome interruption' failed to pass muster at the Centre, an event that marked his own personal and inevitable moment of rupture with the movement, the moment in which he had failed to adapt so that questions could continue to be re-formulated.

In discussion with Richard Johnson, the pedagogic significance of the Centre was assessed by Ros Brunt, John Clarke, Tony Jefferson and Rebecca O'Rourke. Some airing of frustration – low staff numbers, endemic anxiety, Hall resisting 'father' status, was combined with interesting reflections on the paradox of 'teaching theory'. The panel shared apparent consensus that the collaborative approach to supervision was the most sustainable model of practice for the work at hand, avoiding many of the dilemmas that, despite appearances with hindsight, might have undermined progressive intentions, such as the use of exams, the fact that many of the staff became Professors rather than activists 'out there'.

Whether CS in other fora has already moved beyond the 'Hallian' era, or indeed "won" in its inter-disciplinary manifestations, were recurrent points of earnest debate. Another of Johnson's entertaining asides considered the field as being so diverse that "even Stuart Hall couldn't be Stuart Hall". In the end, whilst the 'pop up' idea was evoked to represent the '50' event as a re-occupation of the campus, it was difficult to

avoid the sense that the Centre's 'disproportionate impact', its undeniable legacy, is the outcome of a moment in time that was specific to certain conditions of possibility for experimentation. For readers of JMP, most likely working within firmly embedded 'neoliberal' frameworks and professional practices, fond remembrance and resigned summation, from Grossberg and Johnson respectively, on "spending your life on an impossible project that can never be successful" and how "they let us mess around", may render CCCS more relic than 'unfinished project'.

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NB – proposed image – Muirhead (authors will attempt to acquire) – Sarah Taylor Silverwood.