Lost worlds

Political memoirs of the Left in Britain

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The parliamentary incantation of the 'new' is now neatly matched by both popular and academic fascination with the 'old'. 'The past', as Andreas Huyssen quips, is simply 'selling better than the future'.[1] In the personal arena, it evokes a comforting nostalgia, when not calling up the sorrows of what might have been, as time speeds up with passing years. In the public domain, the past has a more complex presence. In the decade following the decisive defeat of the Labour Party in Britain in 1979, the past was frequently invoked to keep alive the high hopes of only yesterday, already in jeopardy. The past was before us.[2] But by the 1990s the inexorable trouncing of those ideals had installed a more settled sense of mourning. The gradual inflation of the personal domain began to engulf much that remained of collective resistance.

In neat testimony to the process, in academic publishing, history has been collapsing into memory, memory into trauma, and trauma into studies of silence and forgetfulness. The 'traumatic turn' has yielded up the buried secret of memory, one step beyond, yet the underside of, its precursor, the linguistic turn. Attention to personal and collective practices of remembering – and, above all, of failing to remember – has drawn public events into the private sphere. There, it has left behind the intricacies of conscious experience for the enigmas of the unconscious. In the new psychosocial approach to history, the public realm folds itself back into stories of individuals and their ways of coping with the shared hurdles and harms of life, fragmenting and dissolving in the process.

A slew of new books are currently addressing the fragility of memory, as it stretches tenuously across the public–private divide. Two compilations in particular, with authoritative editorial amplifications by cultural theorists Susannah Radstone and Katherine Hodgkin, are exemplary of ongoing work.[*] But if the turn to memory and autobiographical narration is one way of stabilizing our place in the world, anchoring the vicissitudes of personal lives all the way back in childbirth, the Zeitgeist currently encouraging it is suspicious of efforts to speak collectively. Attempts to stand, even cautiously, upon the presumed solidity of a 'we' – to lay claim to some shared narrative – courts disapproval, if not denunciation, as a colonization of the experiences of others.

We can agree that conscious memories are both personal and inescapably collective, dependent upon culturally distinct ways of making sense of experience, but in most of the cultural modes made available for interpreting ourselves today there is a common liberal outlook, encouraging the retrieval of 'uniquely personal' readings of world events. This sits oddly alongside the acknowledgement that we only gain some measure of that world, some sense of our often unsteady footing within it, through the shared stories we can create, clutching on to whatever threads through time others hold out for us. In searching for such support, it is political memoirs, probing the thoughts and practices which have motivated conscious collective efforts – not just to wrestle with the world, but to help change it – which offer some of the most fruitful material. However, nowadays they are likely to attract the cynicism that shadows political activism and vision alike. After all, it was scepticism about politics that paved the way for the new interest in memory and autobiographical narrative in the first place.

There are other reasons why the political memoirs of dissidents may provide unwelcome, eccentric snapshots of history – whether daring to capture the con-

sequential moment for others, or trying to hold on to the diverse legacies of struggle. The burning political questions around which activists position themselves, wrangle and fall out at any one moment – from the precise inadequacies of the Soviet Union to the dangers of 'identity' struggles – can become irrelevant, even absurd, in the next. It is strange to think of political beliefs and emotions as trappings slipped on and off, like Prada footwear, but there have been eras when politics has seemed on a par with sex, at the centre of any dynamic life. In others, more like the present, it is mostly viewed askance, the preserve of careerists and 'old crusties', or the occasion for sudden eruptions of collective feeling which dissipate as rapidly as the day is done.

Nevertheless, however purposely or unwittingly selective, however unreliable and contingent political reminiscence may be, it stirs up questions of lasting significance – from what it is that inspires hope in those most in need of it at any given moment, to what the contexts and conditions are which all too easily erase awareness of cruelties, corruptions or exclusions. Pondering the paradoxes surrounding such issues along with other campaigners of old, mulling over lessons they might hold for resurgent young rebels, seems crucial for coming to terms with the pessimism never far from political life on the Left today. It means engaging critically with politically formative moments, whether in our own lives or those of others. Political engagements can strengthen or disappoint their supporters irrespective of whether they result in success or failure. Their complex legacies often tend to blur that distinction in any case. Such are the thoughts that have led me to some contemporary Left memoirs that address periods that largely predate the political world I came to inhabit in Britain in the 1970s, their historical residue by then already misconstrued or mysterious.

What follows is the first part of an attempt to understand the differing sources and effects of political radicalism, in this case by exploring the reminiscences of men of the Left looking back over their political lives, pondering the defeat of most of the ideals for which they fought. The ebullient re-entry of women into that history, in the final decades of the last century, and its ambiguous bequest to the current one, will be the subject of a second essay, next year.

The Party man: Communism as identity

Though the period seemed new and special to us at the time, the 1960s was far from the first era in which students in Britain were radicalized. We are reminded of this in an extraordinary political memoir, spanning almost the whole of what he calls the 'short' twentieth century (1914–1989), Eric Hobsbawm's *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life*.[*] Early on in his journey, the young Eric arrived in Cambridge in the 1930s to find his fellow students plunging into politics:

> Mine was the reddest and most radical generation in the history of the university, and I was in the thick of it … the 1930s was one of the few periods when an unusual proportion of eminent natural scientists were also politically radicalized. (100)

The Left Book Club, launched in 1936, had 57,000 members by the end of the decade, its popularity spawning a whole movement of local, vocational and interest-based discussion groups.[3] Now that historians have joined in the sudden surge of memoir writing, exploring contemporary history while reviewing their own role within it, we might expect to find telling insights into the disjunctions and tensions of thinkers caught between 'history' and 'memory'. Today, the accounts of lived experience arising from memory, underwriting localized knowledge-claims, are often given more legitimacy than the totalizing presumptions of history. However, Hobsbawm remains deeply suspicious of this move, believing that the current popularity of the partial and misleading 'twilight zone of memory' is not advancing but undermining the credentials of his profession, which should be attempting the difficult task of correctly understanding the past objectively, thereby helping to predict the future: 'More history than ever is today being revised or invented by people who do not want the real past, but only a past that suits their purpose' (296).[4] Accordingly, in his own memoir, depictions of and reflections upon personal feelings are meagre, for the most part curtailed early on, after presenting himself as a curious, solitary, intellectual, homely child – as the photographs endorse – living mostly without close friends.

Hobsbawm warns readers at the outset that he is, anyway, a man who keeps his feelings to himself. It is, of course, a reserve – some might say a strategy

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– familiar as part of the 'character armour' found in men of his generation, for whom the autobiographical mode could be seen as self-indulgence: if not narcissism, then at least something a little too suggestive of the 'feminine'. A similar disdain for self-disclosure is evident in Hobsbawm's scholarly contemporaries, typified by Zygmunt Bauman, who – also still publishing prolifically on the changed world of his closing years – scorns 'displays of ersatz intimacy'.[5] A decade younger, Richard Sennett has suggested that reminiscence, and the seductions of confessional writing, are a form of self-display contributing to the shrinking of the space for public life, eroding the difference between the private and the public.[6] In Hobsbawm, self-restraint certainly meshes flawlessly with the Communist politics which seized him so young and so lastingly in the tough conditions of his

childhood as a Jew in 'Red Vienna' between the world wars, when 'one acquired political consciousness as naturally as sexual awareness', although, interestingly, it was not anti-Semitism but poverty which he recalls afflicting his family life at the time (11). The first hundred pages of *Interesting Times* bring us to the point, in 1935, when the young Hobsbawm decides to abandon his lengthy teenage diary, signing off with a final autobiographical flourish. Presented to the public almost seven decades later, it provides a movingly self-mocking portrait of the Marxist historian as a young man:

> An incorrigible striker of attitudes, which is all the more dangerous and at times effective as he believes in them himself…. Some people find him

extremely disagreeable, others likeable, yet others … just ridiculous… He is vain and conceited. He is a coward. (98–9)

With this abrasive backwards glimpse at his brittle, brash young self, the ageing historian leaves self-scrutiny largely behind. A mistake, in commercial terms, as one reviewer, Perry Anderson, noted.[7] For the book could have been declared a 'masterpiece' had it ended, like a multitude of more conventional memoirs, with the protagonist's coming of age – orphaned, exiled, homeless, but heading for the grandeur of Cambridge – consummation endlessly deferred.

Instead, Hobsbawm's account of his 'long walk through the short twentieth century' has barely begun when he swerves away from his inner life to focus upon the 'interesting times' he leads as a budding, quickly successful, professional historian and, until its final day, a lifelong member of the British Communist Party. Although an uncompromising supporter of the Soviet Union, Hobsbawm from the beginning loved the elegance and grandeur of Cambridge, joining its elite cluster of Apostles and considering himself incalculably lucky to be there – 'like enjoying the constant and envied public company of a universally admired woman' (102). (Feminism will remain, forever, *after* Hobsbawm.) He came from a profoundly impoverished yet culturally middle-class background, yet there is no sense of dramatic incongruity between his delight in the aristocratic splendour of Cambridge and his radical politics, any possible unease seemingly obviated by the extraordinary stability of the author's sense of identity and attachments: 'I became conscious of being a historian at the age of sixteen.' This was a year after he had become a 'lifelong communist', at school in Berlin in 1932. At fifteen he was already 'a man whose life would lose its nature and its significance without the political project to which he committed himself as a school boy even though the project has demonstrably failed, and, as I now know, was bound to fail' (55–6). Fidelity, indeed.

Such allegiance, Hobsbawm reflects, was perhaps assisted by his sense of having a 'facility for deleting unpleasant and unacceptable data', recalling his relative equanimity following the death of one parent then the other in rapid succession during his post-pubescent

years. Perhaps. But this facility is far from unusual, even when trying to remember to remember. As others have noted, the most dramatic life events often appear to make the least impact on memory, in contrast with the rich recollections and feelings sometimes triggered by more mundane things – from familiar objects and scenes to the Proustian moment of that certain taste, that special smell. In Freudian thought, the vividness of such incidental recollection serve as a 'screen memory' of the past, both connecting us with, yet protecting us from, the impact of its potentially more overwhelming aspects. 'The momentous facts of life', the analyst Christopher Bollas writes, are those 'creating a momentary caesura, or blankness – and they stand in isolation, as markers of the subject's history, notations of trauma and subjective absence.'[8]

Hobsbawm's most consistent explanation of why he remained to the very end within the haunting shadow of Stalinism is more compelling. He returns repeatedly to his position in the political universe of Europe (as distinct from Britain) in the 1930s, when Communist Parties were building the Popular Front against fascism. For his generation of Leftists, he says, 'the October revolution represented the hope of the world' (41). It was a world in agonizing need of hope. Nowhere was it needed more than by a Jew in Germany, a Jew born the year of the Russian Revolution, one who can still recall, 'as in a dream', reading the news headline of Hitler becoming chancellor of Germany in 1933, as he returned home from school hand in hand with his sister:

> For someone who joined the movement where I came from and when I did, it was quite simply more difficult to break with the party than for those who came later and from elsewhere. (218)

Yet, others did leave. (Ten thousand, one third of the CPGB, left around 1956, most of them remaining on the Left.) In a telling flash of self-disclosure, Hobsbawm adds that it was egotistical pride that enabled him to sustain that 'almost unbreakable umbilical cord' to the Communist Party he officially joined in 1936. He was determined to prove he could succeed as a historian on an international stage, including the USA, even with his proudly displayed Cold War handicap, 'as a known communist' (218).

Different versions of this self-appellation, such as 'a known Marxist historian', pepper the book. For a man who is so dismissive of what he calls 'identity politics', and who believes that he has never wholly belonged to any place or chosen group, he certainly secured for himself, in his teenage years, two fundamental anchors of his identity, which he has lived

out and defended ever since. He overstates his case, therefore, in so comprehensively dismissing the uses of identity in politics: 'As identity is defined against someone else, it implies not identifying with the other. It leads to disaster' (416). In contrast, I would suggest that today it could be the *lack* of anchors, of any secure sense of identity and belonging, which is potentially as dangerous. People might more effectively manage to align themselves with a sense of their shared humanity with others if, like Hobsbawm, they were able to feel less unanchored and alone, if they could secure for themselves a stronger sense of their own identity – *as a* 'known Marxist historian', even – one they might be happy to flaunt as a badge of their own 'apartness', when seeking some individual affirmation. Whatever the complexity of the task, Hobsbawm does not seriously attempt to justify his warning that to claim an identity for political ends, especially when seeking to overcome institutionalized forms of oppression, is to insist upon a type of distinctiveness, which thereby threatens to negate or exclude that of all others.

Reflecting upon friendships which have ended, Hobsbawm comments, in a rare moment: 'Perhaps private and public lives are not as separable as all that' (145). Indeed. Alongside all we learn from him about twentieth-century history, we glean much as well about the ways in which political commitment can provide the soil for selfhood – at least when the time is ripe and conditions foster such attachments (152). We are made familiar with the dutifully dull, daily life of a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), referred to by its members simply as 'the Party'. Prior to the last two decades before its official demise in 1991, the demands of strict discipline, ruthless efficiency, total emotional dedication were all-encompassing: 'The party was what our life was about. We gave it all we had. In return we got from it the certainty of our victory and the experience of fraternity' (134). They also thereby avoided, he suggests, some of the anguish of those who place the ups and downs of personal passion at the core of their lives, if not altogether living up to the (rather feeble) words they made up and sang in parody of Cole Porter's 'Let's Fall in Love':

> Let's liquidate love/ Let's say from now on/ That all our affection's/ For the workers alone/ Let's liquidate love/ Till the revolution/ Until then love is/ An un-Bolshevik thing. (120)

Not only did members give up much of their time to the Party, they made huge sacrifices, whether to meet membership payments, in jeopardizing job promotions or careers, in remaining loyal even when unhappy

about the frequently unexpected, often seemingly indefensible, reversals of policy decreed by the Soviet Union. However, as Hobsbawm notes, the boredom, bureaucracy, near robotic obedience required of members in the mid-century Communist Party did also mirror the manner, if not the minutiae, of the psychological conformity so hegemonic in the 1950s: 'communist intellectuals were not cultural dissidents' (70). Quite the contrary, for all Hobsbawm's own embrace of the world of jazz. Although there was more than one way of being a communist, especially for those affected by the more bohemian life of the 1920s.

It is understandable, to me, that Hobsbawm should still have no serious regrets at belonging to a party that was perennially a party of protest, never remotely close to holding power in Britain, one that fought primarily to improve the conditions of the working class, locally, nationally and internationally. For the reviled minority, as for the persecutors, the Cold War became a type of religious war. Moreover, members of all the mainstream political parties in Britain could be said to have serious reasons for expressing regret, although they are rarely required to do so: their parties having failed to oppose fascist dictatorships, until forced to; supported the Suez invasion; the USA in Vietnam; condoned any number of murderous regimes internationally, while failing to assist those attempting to oppose, or even expose, them. But, stalwart beyond the bugle's dying echo, it is far less understandable that Hobsbawm should offer so little critical commentary on, or revision of, past political strategies. The late Italo Calvino, for example, echoes Hobsbawm's explanation of why he joined up in Italy: on the one hand, Communism represented the rejection of all that had produced fascism; on the other hand, it promised, via the image of the October Revolution, what seemed 'most modern and progressive and complex from a political, social, economic, cultural point of view'.[9] But, an active member for over fifteen years, Calvino later condemned his own Stalinist complicity, feeling he had to take responsibility for helping to produce a language which defended him and others from seeing a reality they did not want to see: '*Stalinism was also the smooth-talking cheerful mask which concealed the historical tragedy taking place*.'[10]

In contrast, Hobsbawm mostly still defends old sectarian demarcations and largely dismisses alternative visions and engagements. The achievements of the New Left of the late 1950s and early 1960s, for example, are dismissed as negligible in practical terms, 'a half-remembered footnote' (214). Yet, as we'll see, unlike the CPGB, it was the New Left which was decisive in the formation of the massive anti-nuclear movement (CND); was at the centre of anti-Vietnam protests; and was more than receptive to, and hence able to help radicalize, the cultural revolution of the 1960s. It paved the way for the flowering of movement politics, the largest of which would prove to be the Women's Liberation Movement – however apprehensive its embrace of feminism. Hobsbawm manages to all but ignore both Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall, who both helped transform the intellectual and political landscape with their awareness of the significance of culture, just as he remains blind to the complex legacy of second-wave feminism. Finally, he remains uncritically proud of the role he attributes to *Marxism Today* in paving the way for what would become New Labour, undermining the old labour movement and the social-democratic Left, despite now finally regretting the lack of internal resistance to Blair's neoliberal embrace of the market, which has resulted from the undermining of that Left. This is identity politics. The name: card-carrying communist.

Nevertheless, for all his high seriousness, political intransigence, fears that cultural politics has abolished real politics (with its slogan 'the personal is political'), this indomitable campaigner knows one thing about the force of personal narrative:

> Historians of my age are guides to that crucial patch of the past, that other country where they did things differently, because we have lived there … we know what it felt like, and this gives us a natural immunity to the anachronisms of those who were not. (413)

A partial immunity, perhaps. It is not that memory is reliable, far from it. As often as not, we do not know quite what we feel about what is happening to us, around us, as it happens; nor quite why we do, or did, the things we do. Nevertheless, simply 'being there', as he notes, provides us with associations that may help to challenge the imposition of new orthodoxies onto the past. In the face of all he has witnessed and reported on the rise and fall of political power, institutions, even empires, it is the strength of Hobsbawm's personal conviction, in his mid-eighties, that social injustice can and must be fought, that gives his parting words their persuasive, even hopeful, force: 'Let us not disarm, even in unsatisfactory times. Social injustice still needs to be denounced and fought. The world will not get better on its own' (418).

Nothing personal

The force of Hobsbawm's conclusions are inseparable from the engaging style with which he manages to sustain the reader's interest throughout his journey, even with scant self-disclosure. A second political memoir has just appeared from much the same stable, by another Marxist historian also in his mid-eighties, John Saville's *Memoirs from the Left*.[*] It chronicles the same extraordinary events, from a man who had almost identical affiliations, engagements and opinions to Hobsbawm. Joining the radical student movement at the London School of Economics in 1934, in the midst of global economic slump, massive unemployment, war clouds over Europe, Saville (then still using his given name of Orestes Stamatopoulos) was quickly part of all the radical movements of the day. He imbibed the ideas of the gigantic anti-war movement – in 1934 it held an overflow meeting at the Albert Hall, founded the Peace Pledge Union, collecting eleven and a half million votes in its National Peace Ballot the following year (calling for large-scale disarmament and sanctions against warring nations). In the mid-1930s Saville marched against Oswald Mosley and his British fascist followers, supported the Unemployment Movement and the Hunger Marches, opposed the emerging fascist regimes in Europe. In 1934 he also joined the CPGB: 'It seemed to me a very "matter-of-fact" decision' (9) – as it did to thousands of others at the time.

A fellow member of the Communist Party's Historians' Group, formed in 1946, Saville (unlike Hobsbawm) left the Party in 1956, to become an early member of the New Left, starting the *New Reasoner* alongside Edward Thompson, and a little later the *Socialist Register* with Ralph Miliband. Saville's memoir is packed with useful information, whether pointing out police collusion with Mosley's anti-Semitism, or explaining the failure to appreciate Stalin's barbarism before 1945. Students of Saville recall him as an excellent and indefatigable teacher, and as displaying the dogged tenacity essential to keep political campaigns afloat in tough times. It may be significant that Saville is the only one of these political memoirists I have never met, yet, overstuffed with detail, delivered for the most part in monotonal register, his memoir reads to me like sixty years of minute-taking, punctuated by somewhat staid opinions.

Had we no counter-examples, the book could serve as a cautionary tale on the numbing effect on the imagination of a lifetime in politics. But then, unlike one of his closest comrades from the past, E.P. Thompson (who did not live to the ripe old age when others have felt free to pen their memoirs), Saville likes to dissociate political life from *any* emotional engagement. He mocks Raphael Samuel's version of the emotional benefits of Party membership, suggesting in relation to the large contingent of Communists in the engineering industry that 'to suggest they needed a sense of "belonging" or a craving for "recognition" – can only be described as absurd' (9). I am more inclined to think it absurd to suggest otherwise, of *any* comprehensively committed band of people. Saville is a man who can still speak on public platforms with wisdom and passion against deprivation, poverty and worsening global inequality. Yet the flat, mechanically driven recording he offers of the twentieth century renders his personal recollections of extraordinary times, in Africa, the Shetlands, India or London, almost humdrum, devoid of affect, whether we are reading about his intimate life ('I loved my mother and she remains in my memory'), his contact with charismatic comrades, such as Stuart Hall ('He is an extremely nice man, highly competent and imaginative'), or his depiction of the impact of catastrophic events on those most affected by them – for example, Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin in 1956 ('It was clear from what was being said from the platform that the "mistakes and errors" of the Stalin years were responsible for the repressive acts which had outraged public opinion beyond the Soviet Union and for which the world communist movement had acted so long as apologists') (184, 123, 101). This is also one of the few memoirs of the twentieth century I have read that is devoid of photographs. Most importantly, I can glean next to nothing about the emotional hold of politics on Saville – a situation that makes this an unhelpful memoir for my own purposes, so I will have little reason to return to it.

Both Hobsbawm and Saville remain committed to the need to work for change, while also certain, as Marxist historians, that there are inescapable limits to what can be accomplished by human agency, change being largely determined by more general economic and technological forces. 'The world will not get better on its own', both men agree, in guarded tension with their own old-style Marxist epistemology, in which change is always immanent in the universal dialectics of the historical process itself. Nevertheless, for a while, in the three decades following the end of

World War II, the world did seem to get better, almost on its own, at least the Western capitalist part of it. This much is clear from Hobsbawm's other Olympian survey of the astonishing speed of change in world affairs over the last century, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914–1991*.[11] There he maps out its effects not on his own life and its landscape, nor upon his conscious participation in the making of its history, but rather on the rapid shift from the desolation and barbarism during the first half of the century (two world wars, Hitler, the Holocaust and Stalinism) to a Golden Age of rising hopes in its second half (accompanying widespread welfare and liberal reforms, which generated all manner of radical ideas and freedom movements across the world), only to end with so many of the new aspirations crushed at its close (rising inequality globally, ethnic strife and warfare). Ironically, perhaps, it would be the young benefactors of increasing educational and employment opportunities after the Second World War who would rebel against the conformity and acquisitiveness pervading those affluent times, the very choices and erudition opened up for them shedding its light on remaining inequalities and injustices – at home and abroad – masked in the orchestrated consensus of the 1950s.

Revolutionary agitations

Radical politics began to reappear as the 1960s unfolded, both in the labour movement and on the university campus. Terry Eagleton recalls this period in his rather anomalous political reckoning, *The Gatekeeper: A Memoir*.* It includes his arrival in Cambridge to study English literature, a generation after Hobsbawm. However, even more self-consciously than Hobsbawm, this Left memoir aims provocatively to 'outwit' the current conventions of the genre, seeking (we are told) to frustrate both the author's own desires for self-display and readers' desires for access to his inner life. Eagleton's reflections on the pleasures, hopes and miseries of life are rendered almost entirely through hilarious anecdotes of the feats and peccadilloes of the people he encountered on his bracing ride through it, attentive primarily to the institutions that produce such inhabitants – Irish Catholicism, Oxbridge, the Leninist party – with scant depictions of his own mood or musings along the way. The sacrificial bleakness of Irish monastic life, the cheerlessness of his working-class childhood in Salford in the 1950s, are recounted

alongside the weird ways of revolutionary vanguards, as he joins a small Trotskyist group. He parodies the enduring aristocratic complacencies of college dons, sheltering beneath the dreaming towers of Cambridge, as he begins his own academic career on the privileged inside. He mocks the dawn leafleting, endless meetings, exhaustive arguments forging the single 'correct' line amongst the Marxist militants determined to rouse the masses from their own dreaming slumbers, on the disadvantaged outside.

Avoidance of the confessional mode is justified early on in Eagleton's disdain for the ruling 'fetish of interiority'. He contrasts the promotion of an agonized inwardness with his own provocative delineation of an 'alternative' cultural background to which he remains the most loyal adherent: 'A Catholic aversion to subjectivism went along with a working-class allergy to emotional ostentation, and both were underpinned by Irish devotion to the tribe rather than the individual' (31–2). The cultural homogeneity he depicts is obviously dubious, expounded as much for its wit as its wisdom. (James Joyce, just for one, likes to suggest rather different strains of Irish Catholicism: 'All moanday, tearsday, wailsday, thumpsday, frightday, shatterday till the fear of the Law.'[12]) As Philip Derbyshire noted in this magazine, you need to 'read asquint', to gain any personal detail from Eagleton.[13] But you do not need to read obliquely to see why this clever young man from Salford would move immediately into embattled confrontation with the 'braying tones' of privilege on reaching Cambridge. Unlike Hobsbawm, Eagleton says he always felt a stranger in Cambridge; indeed, he claims always to have loathed it. And since he was not alone in making this sudden leap upward – the times were, the airwaves proclaimed, ripe 'for revolution' – it would have been odd, at that moment, were it otherwise.

It would have been anomalous then *not* to be politicized by the dramatic contrast between his adult opportunities and the deprivations of his childhood, within a family described as always isolated, anxious and gloomily conscious of its own 'social inferiority': 'The present is made up largely of what failed to happen in the past; my present, anyway' (104). It is only in the chapter 'Losers', well into the second half of this brief book, that the buoyant, humorously anecdotal tales brake for more poignant personal description which, delivered in a low-key, distancing, largely passive voice, unveils the author's compelling

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* Terry Eagleton, *The Gatekeeper: A Memoir*, Allen Lane, London, 2001. 178 pp., £9.99 hb., 0 713 99590 4. Page references appear in the text.

drive to compensate for his father's life. This father 'had the unattractiveness of the victim', a man who sacrificed his own life for that of his son and his other two children (115). A clever, uneducated, endlessly labouring, always physically remote father, he was a performer, never an achiever. But the son will achieve all that his father could not, and will do it effortlessly through words, tirelessly proving he can overcome 'the uncertain literacy of [his] own early environment', and lay to rest his father's silence with talk, the silence of a man who 'was agonizingly inarticulate, and deeply

ashamed of it' (121). In his own continuous stream of literary accomplishments, in his loquacious vivacity and wit – with Oscar Wilde his inspiration, Bertolt Brecht his mentor – Terry Eagleton will turn upside down his father's sense of failure. Even in his love of liquor (his father a devout teetotaller), he tells us, in an aside that we can now recognize as his characteristic conceit of distanced understatement: 'Perhaps I compensated for him in that way too.' Though boasting of them to others, the father never praised his children, never touched or played with them: 'Catholics did not go in for all that subjective mush' (115, 121–3).

However rashly he simplifies the customs of Catholicism (my very different Jewish father never touched or played with his children in those years either), it was certainly characteristic of Eagleton's chosen far-left Trotskyist milieu (the Workers Socialist League) consciously to subordinate the sphere of personal life to that of politics. All around, others spoke an idiom

of self-emancipation, while Trotskyist sects disdained the loose-knit student movement and the radical events of the day, although using them as recruiting grounds for their own more 'serious' goal – in what has since been only somewhat harshly ridiculed by Stuart Hall as an 'entirely gestural mimicry of revolutionary politics'.[14] What is more unusual is Eagleton's steadfast, if ambivalently expressed, loyalty ever since to this universal vision of revolutionary Marxism acquired in his young adulthood, flanking an enduring scorn for that poetics of personal liberation which characterized more popular forms of sixties radicalism. Along with what remains of the Trotskyist Left from those post-sixties days, when diverse radical passions made headway for a while, this has left him a lifelong Marxist, a supporter of class struggle, but incurably suspicious of feminism or other forms of what he also too easily dismisses as 'identity politics'.

Nevertheless, Eagleton has acquired some critical distance on many of the defining features of his Trotskyist past, and he provides more than enough information for his readers to draw certain lessons about radical politics – beginning with the futility of sectarian squabbles. Looking back, he sees most of the energies of his militant group being directed not towards fighting the injustices of capitalism 'but to the rather more urgent war against other left-wing organizations' (81). Of course, even the most taxing Left groups usually manage to supply a social life and sense of belonging for members – often assisted by so many outlets for verbal aggression – particularly, as Eagleton notes, for those with little social charisma (a trait dauntingly pronounced, I recall, in many a 'comrade' whom one was not free to choose to ignore). However, given a reputation for wit and bonhomie at the time, it is hard to see what the exact allure of this particular far-Left faction was for the author. Perhaps, one might speculate, it offered certain continuities with a dour, despised, aggrieved childhood, as well as some targets for persisting anger over his parents' fate.

The decades of Left defeat that began in the 1980s, with student politics largely disappearing from academia, has left Eagleton today looking for a more realistic assessment of the legacy of the radical politics he lived through. For all its occasional absurdities, he remains confident that, globally, sixties radicalism did speed the end of the war in Vietnam; it also helped democratize higher education in Britain (hardly – though he fails to mention it – the project of his own faction within it). Political activism, he now reflects, although sometimes effective and rewarding, is more often a thankless business, never free

from contradiction. Just one of the contradictions he notes is that in fighting for elementary social justice, it is 'revolutionaries' who are so often protecting and conserving the past, even as capitalism spreads anarchy and revolution on all fronts. Here Eagleton is reprising an idea that can be found in leading critics of unconstrained capitalism, from Karl Marx himself to Walter Benjamin or Marshall Berman. The young man who arrived in Cambridge in the 1960s was, in the reflection of his older self, as opinionated as he was ignorant; but the Eagleton we read today is more astutely epigrammatic: 'It is a sign of just how bad things are that even the modest proposal that everyone on the planet gets fresh water and enough to eat is fighting talk' (84). Nevertheless, it is grossly misleading to suggest that modest proposals and traditionalist outlooks were ever the guiding spirits of Left radicalism in *any* era of the twentieth century. Left militants espoused their own version of the modernist insistence on the need for dramatic 'change', 'renewal' and 'progress', to fight social injustice and build a better, fairer world. Eagleton's mature mellowing, after his youthful certainties, also often vanishes in cruel but clever reviews of fellow academics, in particular when ridiculing (a little hypocritically?) the obscurities of post-structuralist prose.[15]

Unlike Hobsbawm, Eagleton is forever trying to outmanoeuvre the contradictions of the different worlds he occupies – geographically, politically and intellectually. Claiming to loathe Oxbridge, he has spent most of his life there, until recently occupying the prestigious Thomas Wharton Chair of English at Oxford; a class warrior, his affiliations were never with any popular political formation; a Marxist, he is aware of the strengths of the intellectual perspectives he disparages and the weaknesses of his chosen standpoint. It is hardly surprising that irony is his main weapon. He as nearly doubles as stand-up comedian. 'It would be intellectually dishonest', he announced in the 1990s, 'to pretend that Marxism is any longer a living political reality'; socialism 'is now probably a more plagued and notional idea than at any stage in its turbulent career' (15). When he wants to, Eagleton can express eloquently the folly of positioning class politics against the recognition of multiple identities or subject positions, when any 'reasonable' concept of equality must engage notions of difference. He similarly repudiates any necessary opposition between universalism and cultural particularism, knowing that the flowering of difference so often calls for widespread solidarity to fight exploitation, relying upon some notion of universal humanity. Indeed, he even

suggests, quoting Raymond Williams, that with socialism currently discredited, it is 'militant particularism' that is on the rise, 'which it would be foolish to hope to short-circuit' (121). (Williams has throughout served as a foil for Eagleton's ambivalent relation to academic trends: his original mentor, later mocked as a parochial humanist and idealist, he would be embraced again after his death in 1988 for his influential cultural work.[16]) Yet he remains largely scornful of cultural politics, and post-colonial studies in particular, for obscuring Western military dominance and economic exploitation in talk of discourse, language and identity. Far more perceptive than Hobsbawm about so much that he ostensibly rejects, Eagleton notes that today people largely languish from the lack of any secure sense of identity, feeding the pathological search for one. But he finds it difficult to appreciate those who have managed to refashion hitherto humbled identities, especially dismissive of those 'dreary old bickerings between feminists and socialists', except when capitalism itself throws the two together (93). If he wanted, he could himself facilitate more creative couplings, but his own stubborn Marxist identity, long securing a traditional anti-capitalist stance, prevents him venturing down that road.

The death of socialist man

There was continuity in the political formations of the older Party member of the 1930s and the younger Trotskyist militant loftily recruiting out of the more laid-back environs of the 1960s, which is why I have so far leapfrogged the New Left, moving from the one to the other. The Trotskyist factions, while fiercely critical of those they called the 'Stalinists', shared a common Leninist faith in the pivotal importance of the revolutionary party: its leadership and self-discipline guaranteeing both political and strategic certainties for members; its vanguard role speeding up the inevitable class liberation from the global plunder of capitalism. Sheila Rowbotham explores its dangers persuasively at the close of the 1970s, suggesting that the inappropriate stridency of attacks on the CP at that time fed upon Cold War anti-communism and that by 'overshooting the mark' Trotskism blocked many aspects of the New Left resistance to Stalinism proper. It was the collapse of the previous dominance of Communist Parties worldwide as the legitimate representatives of Marxism after 1956 that facilitated the growth of the ever-splintering Trotskyist groups in Britain and elsewhere, with some of their ranks drawn, quite literally, from the children of old CP members. However, I need to backtrack.

Between these two Left configurations, a 'New Left' had emerged after 1956. In full flight from the horrors of Stalinism, critical also of the rigidities and failings of the British Labour Party, it tried to hew out an open, self-organizing, participatory democratic politics, critical of all democratic-centralist organizational forms and the whole notion of leaders and led. Some departing Communists remained close to the old traditions; others moved ever further away. The Cambridge literary theorist Raymond Williams, who like Edward Thompson had always been interested in the cultural dimensions of class, was soon lining up with younger radicals, including Stuart Hall (who had never been in the Party), making a still more definitive break with the Communist past.[17] They began to focus upon way in which popular culture works to mediate the forces contesting within it.

This first New Left offered, primarily, a new way of organizing politically, stressing the importance of 'building socialism from below', in the 'here and now', through diverse forms of self-organization. Its principles were for a while embodied in the rapid growth of CND, with its lively marches to Aldermaston, at the turn of the 1950s. CND was the first of the postwar 'new social movements' to emerge in Britain, seeking to forge cross-class alliances, while offering a radical critique of capitalist domination and intimidation, nationally and internationally: 'Without CND supporters, Anti-Ugly protesters [a protest movement against the banality and conformism of postwar British architecture], African demonstrators, Free Cinema and the Society for the Abolition of the Death Penalty, we would be nowhere', the editors of one New Left publication declared in 1959.[18] In Hall's later account, it was this New Left, still in its 'missionary phase', with its commitment to journals, clubs, networks of contacts (even a short-lived coffee bar) – committed, above all, to the 'propaganda of ideas' (a term borrowed from the utopian socialist William Morris) – which made 'the first faltering steps of putting questions of cultural analysis and cultural politics at the centre of its politics'.[19]

As Hall also recalls, it was Raphael Samuel, who died in 1996 aged 61, who was the dynamo, the inspiration, the indispensable catalyst of this early New Left. Appropriately, therefore, in ways none of the previous memoirs has managed, it is from Samuel's

recollections of his Communist childhood and young adulthood, 'The Lost World of British Communism', that we can gain the richest picture of the ways in which class politics is lived as personal support, cultural belonging and ideological conviction, quite as much as in terms of economic imperatives.[*]

Twenty years Hobsbawm's junior, at first glance Samuel appears as another pea from the same pod. Two of a kind, they were both tall, lean, sharp-featured, resolutely secular, Ashkenazi Jews; both in childhood knew poverty, loneliness, hardship; already in their early teens both self-identified as Communists, and remained committed to its ideals throughout their lives; both chose permanent professional identities as historians, also in their teens; both had an obstinate, compelling sense of self. Indeed, still a teenager, Samuel was already attending the prestigious Communist Party Historians' Group, with Hobsbawm, Thompson, Saville and Christopher Hill, among others. Yet Hobsbawm and Samuel were almost the antithesis of each other. Hobsbawm was a political dissident, yet otherwise conventional; an outwardly dour, establishment figure. Samuel was a chaotic 'eager vagabond', full of 'hare-brained' schemes (as the older man saw him), with an exuberant inventiveness, charm and magnetism that could entice even the most reluctant eventually to endorse (or at least fail successfully to resist) his wildest proposals, often against their better judgement. Hobsbawm quietly survived what he calls 'the great 1956 earthquake' by dropping out of political activism while remaining in the Party; the effect on Samuel was devastating, even while intensifying his political activism as he worked to reinvent himself. Said to have worn a black armband, and shed tears on learning of Stalin's death in 1953, he saw his world fall apart three years later, leaving him for a long while, as his friend Hall reports, 'in serious emotional and intellectual difficulties, rescued only from serious breakdown by Christopher Hill's timely recommendation of him for a tutorship at the trade union Ruskin College'.[20]

Yet, true to the extraordinary fortitude and diligence implanted in his Communist training, though now wholly repudiating its hierarchical regulation and programmatic teaching, the anguished Samuel hurled himself into the New Left's renewal of radical intellectual and cultural life. He proposed, largely

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[*] Raphael Samuel, 'Faith, Hope and Struggle: The Lost World of British Communism, Part One', *New Left Review* 154, November/December 1985; 'Staying Power: The Lost World of British Communism, Part Two', *New Left Review* 156, March/April 1986; 'Class Politics: The Lost World of British Communism, Part Three, *New Left Review* 165, September/October 1987. Henceforth *LW* I, II and III in textual references.

orchestrated and successfully solicited funds and resources for popular debates, speaking tours, publications and, against everyone's better judgement, the famously doomed Partisan Café in Soho, manning the kitchen and designing the menu himself: 'the part-international, part-proletarian, part-provincial, part-Jewish diasporic flavour of its "Bill of Fare" was pure distilled "Samuel"', Hall reflects, from its Irish peasant stew to its Patna rice, Viennese coffee and Russian tea, with much else in between. So, too, was Samuel's stubborn refusal to allow an espresso machine on the premises, leading those chatting in the Partisan to sneak across the road to buy their espresso coffee and return.[21]

But history was Samuel's abiding passion: history converted into politics, politics converted into history, through the mission of inspiring in everyone he encountered the belief that they had an interesting story to tell – whether emerging from a jungle in Bolivia, or a bed-sit in Bromley. He not only encouraged the hitherto excluded and powerless to understand their place in history, but also played a pivotal role in transforming the discipline itself. His most tangible memorial remains the ongoing success of *History Workshop Journal*; his less tangible one the many who feel they owe much of their confidence and ability to encountering him – although, unlike John Prescott, they may lack the chance to affirm it publicly: 'Everything was lovely about that man.' Well, not quite; as publishers, editors and those often inveigled into reluctant action by this 'chaotic, bohemian Prometheus' might ruefully reflect.[22] Though grateful for the personal encouragement they received from him, and the public platform he helped create for new rebel voices (especially that of women's liberation), some saw that behind the 'deliberately dozy, slightly dotty front', he was 'the world's most adept hooker, and ruthless beneath the charm', as Sheila Rowbotham affectionately recalls.[23] However, all would agree that it was this ruthlessness that could make things happen, things that just might allow the past, the present and the future to speak more freely to each other, in ways pertinent to struggles against social disparagement, inequality and injustice. In what could serve as his own epitaph,

Samuel introduced a collection celebrating twenty-five years of *History Workshop* in 1991 by reflecting upon socialism. Only a few decades ago

> [it] was a totem for a sense of collectivity, a name for something which was otherwise ineffable.... As socialism has ebbed in the world at large … it re-enters in another direction as one of those "imagined communities" which, like the nation, it becomes the task of the historian to interrogate.[24]

Yet for all his awareness of the place of the past in the present's future, combining both conservatism and rebellion, it was three decades before Samuel would burrow back into that 'lost world' of his own young life, searching through the debris with his now uniquely honed historical skills. Seeing it on the verge of permanent extinction, Samuel set out to portray the mid-century 'Communist mentality' he had imbibed as a child, combining slivers of memoir with lashings of

archive research and associated memorabilia. Throughout his densely packed account of the daily routines of life inside the CPGB, he critically echoes and enriches Hobsbawm's portrait, while speculating on what it all meant for himself and his family, as well as on the pains and gains, the sentiments, self-perceptions, styles of behaviour, illusions and delusions of other members who then made politics their lives.

Born into an East End Jewish home in 1934, devoid of decoration apart from a bust of Stalin on the kitchen mantelpiece, one of Beethoven in his mother's bedroom, Samuel was a passionate Communist Party supporter in his childhood in the 1940s and a zealous Party recruiter and organizer in his young adulthood at Oxford the following decade. Showing early signs of the character that would make him such an extraordinary historian, Samuel reports his teacher's worried concern about his 'obsession' with 'justice and fairness' – aged six. He was intensely lonely and isolated when evacuated to boarding school in Buckinghamshire during the war years. His early Communism, he later reflects, secured his sense of identity and – an expression of loyalty – of closeness to his absent mother: he busied himself mapping out the progress of Soviet tank manoeuvres. Never at ease with being a child (he describes himself as 'pretending to be a schoolboy', on visits to his father, who was by then divorced from his mother), he soon learnt to win recruits for Communism once allowed back home: organizing a strike against the headmaster at the elite but progressive King Alfred's School he next attended in Hampstead, while getting himself expelled from the school debating society for belligerence (*LW* II, 70). Apparently rebellious, Samuel muses, his childhood Communism also satisfied his craving for authority: 'Like many Communists of my time, I combined a powerful sense of apartness with a craving for recognition, alternating gestures of defiance with a desire to be ordinary and accepted as one of the crowd' (*LW* I, 53).

Depicting the intense neighbourhood networks, deep friendships, disciplined, dedicated, doggedly optimistic, hyperactive spirit of the Communists he knew, Samuel claims: 'To be a Communist was to have a complete social identity, one which transcended the limits of class, gender, nationality' (*LW* I, 11). Strange as it might seem nowadays, he suggests, for his mother's generation being a Communist (as many in their extended family were) was 'a way of being English, a bridge by which the children of the ghetto entered the national culture', leaving behind the hostility or coldness that had greeted them elsewhere. It was also,

perhaps, a way of disowning their own Jewishness, of losing any sense of being Jewish (feared by others, such as his father, with his son refusing to go to synagogue), or any other exclusive identity, whether gendered, racial or ethnic, in favour of an internationalism that saw itself committed to the social and cultural advance of all. Yet, mid-century Communism created an exclusive identity and private world of its own, 'a moral vocation as well as a political practice', not unlike a religion or tribe. Suspicious of outsiders, protective of members, who socialized, drank, even holidayed home and abroad with their own kind, it frowned upon marrying out: 'My mother "wouldn't have dreamt" of having a close friend who was not a Communist.' Nor would her son, until he left the Party aged twenty-one. He kept his thoughts pure by avoiding all dissident books and treating anti-Communists, including his father, as the class enemy (*LW* II, 69–70). The constant political activism served as a way of practising togetherness: 'our demonstrations, though intended as "mass mobilization", could be seen in hindsight as rituals of reassurance' (*LW* I, 12, 11, 46).

However, Samuel is also adroit at placing what might seem some of the most bizarre anachronisms of mid-century Communism within the wider social scene they mirrored, if somewhat more intensely. The 1940s was a time – so unlike today – when the polarization between Left and Right (Labour, working class, versus Conservative, those 'higher-up') was near monolithic; the principle of unity, collectivity, standardization was still everywhere encouraged; self-serving ambition, even individuality were discouraged, both in wartime and during postwar reconstruction: 'a man who wore suede shoes was morally suspect' (*LW* I, 8–9). For all its fast-growing pariah status, the CP fetishism of leadership, discipline, efficiency, punctuality, obedience, exemplary respectability, mimicked much of dominant culture at the time, but more meticulously. Their belief in the central importance of knowledge, above all of science, as a liberatory force that would put an end to social problems, poverty and war, was widely shared. But Communists in particular saw themselves as quintessentially modern and forward-looking, their vanguard role coupled with their striving for a scientific knowledge of everything. Whereas others were now confident that mass education would produce better, healthier citizens and society, Communists more optimistically imagined that socialist educators were 'engineers of the soul' (Stalin's words), producing 'socialist man', 'a different species being', which would be unique, Samuel

observes, 'immune from competition and jealousy, emancipated from selfishness and greed' (*LW* I, 40). Yet, for all its revolutionary goals, the Party was in general consistently non-confrontational, unlike later libertarian and other Leninist formations, 'never more in command of a strike than when beating an orderly retreat' (*LW* II, 111).

Where Party beliefs really were unique, of course, was in their ruling illusion that the Soviet Union embodied their ideal socialist goal, a land free from exploitation and discrimination: 'the only country in the world where anti-Semitism is a crime against the state', as Samuel quotes from Clifford Odet's play *Waiting for Lefty* (*LW* II, 38). In reality, under Stalin, it was perhaps the only country in the world where anti-Semitism remained state policy. Nevertheless, outside the USSR, Communists internationally did work to oppose racism; they supported struggles for national independence in the Third World, most importantly the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. Nor was the CPGB particularly internally fractious; it was extremely successful in producing effective union organizers (especially in engineering), provided excellent fundraisers for compassionate causes, encouraged members' self-education – joining the Party 'was like going back to school', Samuel records one Scottish miner reporting; its members tried to live selflessly, always welcoming and caring towards other members (*LW* III, 86). The point of class struggle was not so much economic as political, to transform society.

It is just this old sense of community Samuel saw as having all but vanished in the CPGB in the 1980s, within what had become its more fashionable liberal 'Eurocommunist' wing, represented by the magazine *Marxism Today*. By the mid-1980s its platform for voices from the Tory Right accompanied a preoccupation with criticizing trade unionism, the Labour Party and the far Left, bringing it into fierce conflict with the Party's mostly ageing trade-union loyalists, grouped around the *Morning Star* newspaper. Despite his long-standing distance from either side, Samuel's journey into his own past sprang, he tells us, from extreme distress at witnessing the ferocity of the modernizers' rejection of former Party convictions, with old class warriors now viewed with social and sexual disgust (dismissed as 'white, male, middle-aged'), even facing expulsion from the Party to which they had given their lives: 'When I read of the expelled London veterans', he writes, sentimentally, 'I imagined them to be rather like the Communists I had been brought up with in St Pancras – sticklers for protocol and precedent, completely untroubled by doubt, but

brave, selfless and with a redeeming London wit' (*LW* III, 55; *LW* II, 35).

Yet, from the outside, the two factions still had much in common, as he notes, each struggling to maintain a sense of their vanguard role in harsh times for the Left, albeit now in disagreement over the prioritizing of class and the role of union militancy. The internal battle was symptomatic of changes outside the CP. Earlier Party thraldom to the 'working class' was contingent upon a world where trade unionism had grown from strength to strength throughout most of the twentieth century. Its defeat began only in the 1980s, following a decade of exceptional strength and militancy. Oddly, in Samuel's analysis, a retreat *into* trade unionism within the CP from the late 1960s had begun with the Party's disenchantment with itself, when it no longer made the same demands on its shrinking membership, factory branches had disappeared, and members, although still powerful within the trade-union movement, worked mostly to contain the militancy of newly radical young workers and other activists. It was the militant trade unionism of the late 1970s (uncharacteristic of Communist traditions), as jobs came under threat and the first signs of welfare cuts began, that sparked off the *Marxism Today* switch from the former Communist rhetoric of homage to working-class struggle to a broad embrace of the idea of the new social movements – at a time when these movements were already beginning to weaken and fragment. What had disappeared on both sides of the Communist split was any confidence in the possible success of revolutionary transformation. Thus, four years before it voted to dissolve itself, Samuel could justly describe combat inside the CPGB as a 'war of ghosts', for all its impact on an equally embattled broader Left (*LW* III, 52).

With this final reflection on the closing years of the CPGB, Samuel halts his peregrinations on his Communist past, although not without promising readers a follow-up essay on 'The Politics of the Personal' (*LW* III, 91). It never materialized; nor – mutual friends assure me – would it ever have done. True to his roots, Samuel could hold on to his early political goal of universal justice and respect for all by focusing in on the stories of a multitude of individuals, but he did not risk rethinking questions of Left unity or regrouping. Nor would, or could, he wander too far down the road of narcissistic self-narration. He was never very happy with the deconstructive turn in cultural criticism, its new academic eye narrowed to apprehend the instabilities of the discursively located 'I'. The recent prominence of post-colonial and race studies

also made little impact on Samuel, with its attention to the corrosive role of racial imaginings in imperial legacies of the British present. Though Samuel never identified specifically as a Jew, the strength of his earliest intellectual formation within that world of Jewish Communism meant that, as Bill Schwarz notes in a recent elegant tribute to him, he had little sympathy for more recent critiques of 'Englishness', remaining closest to a world in which the true outsiders remained forever Jews and Gypsies, not newer targets of the harshest forms of British racism, such as that greeting the postwar Caribbean or African diaspora.[25]

Following the large gathering at Samuel's funeral in Hampstead in 1996, one mourner after another wrote of the end of an era, feeling that we on the Left who had gathered on that day represented a bygone age, one which would not come again – at least in our lifetime. Certainly, the combination of confident, outspoken self-identity, committed not to personal ambition but to political change, community building or, at the very least, to understanding and voicing opposition to the injustices of the world, is thought anachronistic in much of public life today; although not on its fringes, where Pied Pipers emerge in the global arena, encouraging young people into battle from Seattle to Genoa and beyond. As one of his oldest friends pondering the uniqueness of Samuel's political formation concluded,

> what strikes me most profoundly is the way he managed continually to remake himself, and to confront the irreversible transitions … through which he passed … without ever really losing his way, renouncing his political convictions or letting go his attachments to the worlds and values which formed him.[26]

Intellectual diaspora

Much the same could be said about the author of those words. Stuart Hall is in my experience the most charismatic of all the New Left figures: still with us, still politically engaged, still rousing audiences on public platforms, still offering friendship and encouragement at every turn. His political memoir would have the most eager readership of all, but he has yet to write it, and probably never will. Fortunately, autobiographical snapshots have been appearing, especially in the frequent interviews for which he is hounded. Despite his long commitment to positioning political affairs in both their cultural-historical conjuncture and the private worlds of personal and interpersonal experience, it is only late in life that Hall has felt able to look back and write personally about his Jamaican past. Reflecting upon the anguish he escaped from as

a black West Indian, he remarks: 'In a sense, it has taken me fifty years to come home.… It was a space I couldn't occupy, a space I had to learn to occupy.'[27]

There are, for sure, always other spaces, other identities, we might learn or decide to occupy, but which instead remain occluded. The cultural and personal impediments that keep them buried are multiple, operating within and outside consciousness. Amusingly, for one who has avoided the narcissistic pleasures of autobiography, the first conversation in which Hall speaks more intimately of himself was one where the interviewer, hot off the plane from Taiwan, straight away fell asleep, leaving Hall, helpful as ever, to fill in for him. It is here, and in a later, book-length conversation with his friend and former student Bill Schwarz (as yet unpublished) that Hall sketches the most moving account of the ways in which his childhood can be seen as a crucible of the destructive permutations of class, colour, status, fantasy and longing which are the lasting legacies of colonial subordination.

Hall was born into a middle-class Jamaican family in 1932, in which the overwhelmingly dominant figure was his lighter-skinned mother, some of whose relatives could pass as 'local white'. She identified with the island's white settler past, having been adopted into a wealthy plantation-owning family with traceable English ancestors. His darker-skinned father, from a poorer middle-class rural background, had risen fast in his career to end up the chief accountant for the Boston-owned United Fruit Company – giving him entry (on sufferance) into respectable Jamaican clubs. Stuart Hall, the 'blackest' of all his family, felt an outsider from the beginning, the one 'who didn't fit':

> My memory of negotiating my way through these relations of unrelenting aspiration is one of embarrassment. I hate the way my mother lords it over servants; I hate the way my father wants to be seen as the person going out with the Americans. I hate the way in which my mother and my father are like the *grande-dame* family visiting the poorer relations in Old Harbour.

His paternal grandmother, whom he loved dearly, and her eight daughters, all lived in one small house.[28]

The older he grew, the greater his alienation from his family and his sense of not fitting into any of the spaces in which they belonged: the school friends he liked were too black to bring home (like the clever, rural schoolboys he loved teaching in the experimental school in which he worked the year before leaving Jamaica – who, unlike him, were not confused about who they were). The sports clubs his father wanted his son to join were places where he saw him demeaned by white people; the identifications his parents made

were with the old colonial world, one that others were now working confidently to overthrow. But, if a sense of estrangement from the past was implanted in him within the family, a sense of post-colonial possibilities soon filled the air of his youth, with the resurgence of the Jamaican independence movement as the country headed towards self-rule after 1945, following the breakdown of the old colonial order in the late 1930s. Indeed, the very week Hall first attended secondary school, he recalls, Michael Manley, already a teenage rebel, was expelled from school for throwing a text book at the English history teacher for his colonial interpretations – proleptically revealing (in ways self-styled postmodernists would quickly forget) the unique impact of a *combined* practical and deconstructive textual assault.

While remaining for a while apart from such politics, feeling personally depressed and resentful within the divided world he occupied (evident, he indicates, in his sad face in the family snapshots he has from school days), the young Hall nevertheless acquired a measure of self-confidence and achievement through academic success, which would take him – at nineteen – to England. With his mother escorting him to Merton College, Oxford, in 1951, to study English Literature, he recalls her sense that she was taking him 'home', to the place he belonged: 'She gave me to the astonished college scout and said, "There is my son, his trunks, his belongings. Look after him".'[29] And it was in England, of course, that he learnt for the first time that he really was 'black': 'That was when I discovered I was a West Indian. I became Caribbean there', in Oxford.[30] It was this experience which accentuated Hall's characteristic stress on the contingency of any identity, its lack of any fixed origin, called into being through the different ways we find ourselves placed, or manage to position ourselves, in the narratives of the past. Learning of his anti-colonial politics, appalled by his identification as black, his mother later instructed him *not* to return to Jamaica.

Indeed, he would not – in the end, could not – ever really return. However, during his first three years in England, Hall was fully immersed in West Indian anti-colonial politics, expecting that he might go back, along with his other Caribbean friends, who all left Britain in the mid-1950s to work for their short-lived dream of a united, socialist West Indian federation. Only much later would Hall decide that he had already known, without acknowledging it, that leaving Jamaica was necessary for his own survival, necessary to escape the toxic colonial mix which he had watched destroy his bright and rebellious elder sister, two years before his departure. (She suffered a breakdown, from which she never wholly recovered, when forced by her mother to break off her relationship with a young student doctor whom she loved, because he was 'black'.) This is the world from which he fled to save himself, guilty, he now reflects, at abandoning his sister to her painful fate, to a life wrecked by the contradictory ambitions projected onto children by aspiring parents in that particular colonial setting:

> I am telling this story [of my sister] because it was very important for my personal development. It broke down for ever, for me, the distinction between the public and the private self … from then on, I could never understand why people thought these structural questions were not connected with the psychic – with emotions and identifications and feelings because, for me, those structures are things you live. I don't just mean they are personal, they are, but they are also institutional, they have real structural properties, they break you, destroy you.[31]

This takes us back to the place where Stuart Hall entered this story, remaking himself – after his Caribbean friends went home, after Suez, after Hungary – to become a prime mover in the New Left in Britain, placing culture and personal life at the heart of its political agenda, struggling for a renewal of ideas and ways of organizing, rather than a renewal of old party formations. The New Left provided a political base broad enough to include those in retreat from the Communist Party after the Soviet invasion of Hungary, along with those, like him, now enraged at the renewed flexing of British colonial muscle in Suez and the threatened war with Egypt (Hall even forced himself to address the Oxford Union for the very first time, 'I had always steered clear of this before: it was one of my refusals').[32] Surprisingly perhaps, Hall reflects, 1956 was decisive because it seemed to mark the end of the frozen, two-camp politics of the Cold War. He was soon working all hours, editing *Universities and Left Review*, then in 1960 launching *New Left Review*. As its founding editor, Hall set that journal's initial utopian tone, dedicated to creating a 'society of equals': one of 'conscious thinking human beings' motivated not so much by the need to escape immiseration as to escape 'last-stage capitalism', to create instead self-determining lives which would prove more than 'something one passes through like tea through a strainer'. This first New Left, Hall later concluded, found itself weakened (as would the 'new social movements' hovering on the horizon) by its organizational dilemmas, 'trapped between the "Vanguards" and the "Fragments"'.[33] One could say, though Hall didn't, it found itself trapped between following

leaders and leaderless follies. Nevertheless, thirty years on, Hall remained as attached as ever to the project of building a 'third' space for 'the renewal of democratic and socialist politics', if with few ideas on quite how, or many platforms on which to do so.

Alone of the men discussed so far, chronicling their political journeys and all – except Saville – obvious outsiders in one way or another, the diasporic journey Hall travelled leaves him acutely conscious of the fragility of identity, his own very much included, alert always to his difference as the 'familiar stranger', whether visiting Jamaica or living in England. Hall was the sole black person when at Merton College, where the only other 'others' were (usually rich) Americans, with whom he joined forces. He encountered no overt racism at Oxford, but unlike Hobsbawm, Samuel, or even the elected contrarian Eagleton, Hall felt deeply out of place in that heartland and pinnacle of 'English-ness'. He would also be the only one to detach himself permanently afterwards: 'the English at home had a solidity, a rootedness, and one was aware that Oxford was so central to that.… You just knew that you were very, very different.'[34] Samuel, like Hobsbawm, always at home at Oxford, never appreciated his friend's deep sense of displacement, once confiding to him: 'But I thought you loved Oxford – you were so much at home there.'[35]

It was this sense of 'difference', so often unrecognized by others, that from the beginning made Hall permanently unhappy with the term 'we', in particular making his relation to the time-honoured

sentiments of inherent unity in class politics troubling for him (whether in the labour movement or the Labour Party). Back in 1954, Hall was already addressing the Oxford Communist Party on class, suggesting their conception of it was inadequate, while he found the local Labour Party unbearable, with its 'combina-tion of puritan self-righteousness and Englishness'.[36] Leaving Oxford in the late 1950s to live in London, teach in school, edit the *Universities and Left Review* as well as help organize its associated club, Hall was energetically opposing the violent racism greeting black workers recently recruited to fill the toughest jobs in the 'motherland': daily assaults by white youth against Caribbean workers in Notting Hill, climaxing in the race riots of 1958. His ideas on the exclusions of class solidarity could hardly have been more incisively etched:

> we were heavily involved in the aftermath of the riots, trying to win back control of the streets; then in trying to set up black and white tenants' as-sociations; trying to counter the racism prevalent in the local constituency Labour party, which was split between those who supported and those who denounced Mosley.[37]

After two years as editor of *New Left Review*, Hall bowed out to a new group which took hold of the journal and formed what has been called the 'second' New Left, headed up by Perry Anderson – less liber-tarian in thought and style, with ties to the Trotskyist Fourth International. Interestingly, this second 'New Left', distainful of the leaderless, chaotic excess of the

first, has not joined the memoirists, although Eagleton is connected to its political configuration.

In 1964 Hall accepted Richard Hoggart's invitation to start up a new Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in Birmingham University, thereby inaugurating what would soon prove the remarkable rise of cultural studies as a radically transdisciplinary new discipline, exploring the political dynamics of cultural formations: hegemonic and subcultural. Its founding texts addressed histories and ruptures in working-class life and cultures, but its objects of study and tools of investigation were broadened and honed with the successive opening up of new areas of study. Hall's use of Gramsci's stress on situating control and contestation in the production and consumption of diverse cultural practices within a comprehensive analysis of the historical conjuncture containing them has provided one of the few abiding principles for those faithful to the Birmingham heritage. This evolving outlook made the CCCS a dangerous place to dwell, the most contentious moment arising when feminism erupted there, when 'the personal lives of everyone there were knocked sideways', Hall ruefully recalls.[38]

Like Samuel, Hall had been among the first to notice and take steps to remedy the New Left's blindness to the marginal place of women on its platforms and in its politics: supporting Women's Liberation from the beginning (alongside his keenly feminist young wife, Catherine Hall), he invited feminist thinkers to work with the Centre. Yet, in a paradoxical but by now all-too-familiar move, it was those most open to change that tended to become its first fall guys, hurt and distressed in the process of the upheavals they helped engender. As the indisputable paternal figurehead and leading light at the Centre, Hall soon find himself targeted as 'patriarchal enemy', hostile and bewildered by the demand that the women students needed to meet and work separately from the men. There would be further more predictable mutinies, fought in the name of pedagogic liberation, as each new political cluster arrived at the Centre. For those trying at every turn to encourage student autonomy and democratic collective modes of learning – through reading groups, joint research and publications – the contradictions were painful. For me, this story has ghastly anticipations of the traumas soon to haunt feminist collectives themselves. By the close of the 1970s, struggling to be in the forefront of the overturning of embedded hierarchies of race, ethnicity and sexual orientation, these collectives often found themselves torpedoed by the forces they helped liberate. In reassessing his own relation to that first rebellion, Hall writes:

> Living the politics is different from being abstractly in favour of it. I was checkmated by feminists; I couldn't come to terms with it, in the Centre's work. It wasn't a personal thing. I'm very close to many of the feminists of that period. It was a structural thing. I couldn't any longer do any useful work from that position. It was time to go.[39]

True or not, go he did. He took his pioneering cultural studies agenda into the sociology department of the Open University, which was itself one of the first universities in Britain to develop more creative pedagogical tools (but within more formal structures) to enable students, without formal qualifications, to study off-campus.

Theorizing race and ethnicity as hybrid, contingent, 'cultural identities', Hall's battles with the reductionisms of class politics and the Leninism of Marxist practices continued. He became a – if not the – key intellectual influence on the 'Eurocommunist' turn of *Marxism Today*, in which it positioned itself against its own former doctrinal beliefs, although not equally against its former strategic conceits. In this mode, in 1979, he launched his ground-breaking analysis of 'Thatcherism', arguing presciently in 'The Great Moving Right Show' that nobody could now afford to ignore the 'definitive swing to the Right' symbolized by Thatcher's victory.[40] Ten years later, after Thatcher's symbolic defeat of Arthur Scargill and the miners' strike, after the defeat of Ken Livingstone and the moment of creative resistance during his days at the GLC (abolished in 1986), after *Marxism Today* had continued its attack on 'the British Left' for its inability to jettison old conventions and its refusal to face up to the 'new times' of 'popular capitalism', Hall would declare the death of 'Socialist Man':

> The problem now is to rethink the politics of class as, and through, a politics of difference. I truly did believe for a time that it was not me but 'Socialist Man' who would appear somewhere, homogenize all differences, and 'make socialism'. … [but] 'Socialist man' has gone over the hill and far away, and thank God for his departure. *Finito!* Now any future is a future of difference, any future society a society of diversity.[41]

I was somewhat shocked when I heard Hall utter this obituary, with his familiar compelling rhetoric. I remain troubled by the sentiments it encourages, despite having myself worked against the rigidities, the moralism and other glaring deficiencies of traditional labourism and purportedly revolutionary class politics alike. Piecing together his political journey now, I feel

I understand better how he has got here, still one of most persuasive figures on the Left – his egalitarian spirit unbowed and unbroken.

What I learn from the men's memoirs and memories I have looked at is precisely the message Hall is most eager to deliver from his own journey: new times, however revolutionary the dream, reconfigure as much as they transform the old – which calls, I think, for a softer burial of 'socialist man'. We reproduce what we are breaking from, even when heading towards and beyond profound ruptures. On the world's stage, this indicates the permanent nature of struggle. We never simply win; but then again, we never simply lose either. If we cannot manage to change the world in line with a heart's desire for greater justice and equality, we might at least attempt to understand it. But if we bother to attempt to understand it, we might at least puzzle over what changes are for the better, and play what part we can in the possibilities and perils of promoting them. For the world will not stop changing. It makes sense to promote the least bad outcomes, while always wondering along the way whether we are for the moment winning or losing.

Notes

1. Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2003, p. 20.
2. See, for example, Sheila Rowbotham, *The Past is Before Us: Feminism in Action Since the 1960s*, Pandora, London, 1989.
3. Jon Heddon, 'The Left Book Club in Manchester and Salford', *North West Labour History* 21, 1996/7, p. 58.
4. See also the essays collected in Eric Hobsbawm, *On History*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1997.
5. Bauman quoted in Madeleine Bunting, 'Profile of Zygmunt Bauman: Passion and Pessimism', *Guardian,* Review section, 5 April 2003, p. 22.
6. Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, W.W. Norton, New York, 1992.
7. Perry Anderson, 'The Age of EJH', *London Review of Books,* 3 October 2002, p. 3.
8. Christopher Bolas, 'The Function of History', in *Cracking Up*, Routledge, London, 1995, p. 140. His inspiration here is, of course, Lacan's notion of the unbearable 'Real'.
9. Italo Calvino, *Hermit in Paris: Autobiographical Writings*, Jonathan Cape, London, 2003, p. 148.
10. Ibid., p. 198; stress in original.
11. Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914–1991*, Abacus, London, 1995, p. 627.
12. James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, 1939, part 2.
13. Philip Derbyshire, 'Terry's Turns', a review of *The Gatekeeper*, *Radical Philosophy* 113, May/June 2002, p. 54.
14. Stuart Hall, 'The First New Left', in *Out of Apathy: Voices of the New Left 30 Years On,* ed. The Oxford University Socialist Discussion Group, Verso, London, 1989, p. 32.
15. See, for instance, his attacks on Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha, reprinted in *Figures of Dissent*, Verso, London, 2003.
16. See Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, Methuen, London, 1976; Terry Eagleton, ed., *Raymond Williams: Critical Perspectives*, Polity, Cambridge, 1989.
17. See E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1963; Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1961.
18. Quoted from the editorial of the last issue of *Universities and Left Review* in Stuart Hall, 'The First New Left', p. 33.
19. Hall, 'The First New Left', p. 26.
20. Stuart Hall, 'Raphael Samuel: 1934–96' *New Left Review* 221, January/February 1997, pp. 119–227; reprinted in *Raphael Samuel, 1934–1996: Tributes and Appreciations*, private publication, p. 55.
21. Stuart Hall and Bill Schwarz, *Conversations with Stuart Hall*, Polity, Cambridge, forthcoming.
22. Bill Schwarz, 'Keeper of Our Shared Memory', *Guardian*, 10 December 1996, reprinted in *Raphael Samuel*, p. 2.
23. *Raphael Samuel*, p. 76.
24. Raphael Samuel, Editorial Introduction, *History Workshop: A Collectanea 1967–1991,* Ruskin College, Oxford, 1991, p. iv.
25. Bill Schwarz '"We have met before": Caribbean Stories and the Predicament of History', paper delivered for the Raphael Samuel Memorial Lecture, 20 June 2003.
26. *Raphael Samuel*, p. 68.
27. 'The Formation of a Diasporic Intellectual: An Interview with Stuart Hall by Kuan-Hsing Chen', in David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen eds, *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, London, Routledge, 1996, p. 489.
28. Hall and Schwarz, *Conversations with Stuart Hall*.
29. 'The Formation of a Diasporic Intellectual', pp. 492, 489.
30. Hall and Schwarz, *Conversations with Stuart Hall*.
31. 'The Formation of a Diasporic Intellectual', pp. 489, 488.
32. Hall and Schwarz, *Conversations with Stuart Hall*.
33. *Out of Apathy*, pp. 36, 38.
34. Hall and Schwarz, *Conversations with Stuart Hall*. More controversially, Hall now often suggests that with the undermining of familial, community or workplace belongings, he sees such a post-colonial identity, or deracination, as 'the archetypal late-modern condition', an attribute increasingly shared by all – in agreement with the volatility or 'disembeddedness' of identities described by Bauman, Beck, Sennett or Giddens.
35. Personal communication from Stuart Hall.
36. Hall and Schwarz, *Conversations with Stuart Hall*.
37. Ibid.
38. 'The Formation of a Diasporic Intellectual', p. 500.
39. Ibid.
40. Stuart Hall, 'The Great Moving Right Show', *Marxism Today*, January 1979, pp. 14–29.
41. *Out of Apathy*, p. 153.