Book Reviews


Born in Jamaica, Stuart Hall studied at Oxford University in Britain. Although he returned to Jamaica for visits, he spent the rest of his life in Birmingham and London. As one of the foremost intellectuals of his generation, he has made an enormous contribution to cultural and political thought, and his work has had a lasting impact in both social sciences and the humanities. The essays in these two volumes were written less as academic pieces (though their academic import is immense) than as interventions into the analysis of social and political problematics, key issues, and debates. Arriving in Britain in the 1950s, he was a central figure in the New Left, a founding member of the field of Cultural Studies as a distinctive area of investigation, and for over ten years the director of the renowned Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University. Indeed, the worldwide fame of the CCCS owes much to his intellectual and personal leadership. He believed in collaborative intellectual enterprise which was a hallmark of the CCCS. He was generous to a fault and those of us, like myself, who had the fortune to meet him as students can confirm his proclivity to share knowledge and ideas in a dialogic mode. David Morley, the editor of the two volumes, notes that his primary concern was to make the selection comprehensive enough to represent the full range of Hall’s output. At 3 million words, they do indeed bring together the most important parts of his oeuvre.

Volume One begins with “Cultural Studies: Culture, Class and Theory,” featuring some of the foundational essays in which Hall developed his ideas about the initial paradigms that emerged from CCCS. The work of Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, and Gramscian Marxism feature significantly here. Then addressing theoretical and methodological principles surrounding the analytics of class, race, and articulation, the volume includes the important essay “Rethinking the ‘Base and Superstructure’ Metaphor” as well as the singularly critical essay “Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance,” in
which Hall takes the case of South Africa and interrogates the analyses of Harold Wolpe and John Rex to draw lessons about how one can best analyze the articulations of race and class without reducing them to either an essentialist structure or an epiphenomenal status. This essay highlights Hall's concern with developing a nonessentialist understanding of Black subjectivity, one that does not treat race in terms of a singular, unitary, and transhistorical formation. Historical specificity is a central tenet within Hall's analysis. Volume I also includes three essays on media and mass communications, including "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse" and "Culture, the Media and the 'Ideological Effect.'" It concludes with three pieces that are central to Hall's political preoccupations: "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular'"; the preface to the 35th anniversary edition of his iconic (cowritten) book Policing the Crisis; and "The Great Moving Right Show," an incisive critique of the shift to the Right exemplified by the ideological trope he called "Thatcherism."

The second volume brings together work on questions of race, ethnicity, diaspora, identity, and the postcolonial. It opens with "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity." This is an exposition of Hall's approach to nonreductionist Marxism that emphasizes class but is not class-centric. It is an approach that analyzes the ways in which different axes of differentiation such as class, race, and ethnicity articulate in a given conjuncture (another one of the key concepts in Hall's work). Feminists have used the term intersectionality to examine the articulation between gender and other power axes. Hall's work may be thought of as intersectional insofar as it explores the interrelationship between race, class, and ethnicity, even though gender is not central to it. Some would probably argue that, strictly speaking, it is not part of the intersectionality analytics because of this absence of gender. Volume 2 focuses on the politics of anti-essentialism in addressing Black politics and multiculturalism. It includes essays such as the "West and the Rest," "Thinking the Diaspora," and "Through the Prism of an Intellectual Life," the last one presented at a conference on the work of Stuart Hall held in Jamaica in 2007. The text also covers three separate interviews with Hall by Kuan-Hsing Chen, David Scott, and Les Back, respectively, which are reflections on both his work and his personal life. These intimate narrations of a diasporic life throw powerful light on theoretical and political issues and problematics of today.

This collection is a treasure trove of Hall's intellectual and political offerings; I recommend it highly.

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