

For Stuart Hall

Joe Sim remembers his PhD supervisor

Samuel Beckett, one of Stuart Hall's favourite writers, once observed that the purpose of art was to leave a 'stain upon the silence'. So too with Stuart's life and work. His cultural and political interventions were not about silence. Rather, through the exhilarating cadences in his voice, and the warm embrace of his laughter and chuckle, he used the power of the spoken word to turn heads, capture yearnings and suggest possibilities that could, with the right politics, be reconfigured into probabilities. His work was insurgent and redemptive; the intertwining of both provided the strategic base for thinking that a better world was possible.

For Stuart, the moment of Margaret Thatcher ushered in an age of 'philistine barbarism' built around 'regressive modernisation' designed to 'educate and discipline the society into a particularly regressive form of modernity, by paradoxically, dragging it backwards through an equally regressive version of the past'. This insight perfectly captured the Victorian values and atavistic, state authoritarianism lurking restlessly at the core of Thatcherism, the equally authoritarian communitarianism intrinsic to Blairism, and the venomous anti-statism ruthlessly pursued by Cameron's coalition government. In Stuart's work, these projects were not just anti-democratic but they were anti-life itself. They left spirits lacerated, hopes smashed and imaginations stunted, including those who championed them. Could they *really* experience the transcendence in Miles Davies' trumpet playing or in Bob Marley's lyrics to *Redemption Song* when profit and loss ruled their hearts and the stock market dominated their minds?

The regressive, common sense of Thatcherism, Blairism and Cameronism could never match the good sense of the left which, despite its political and strategic shortcomings, and its personal hubris and bluster, contained some seed of solidarity and empowerment, fun and laughter, that was a universe away from the lugubrious, balance-sheet mentality of a parasitical minority who condemned the majority to live in and 'under the shadow of Iron Times'. For Raymond Williams, Stuart's friend and ally, capitalist culture sought to turn 'human beings into masses, and thence into something to be hated and feared'. Stuart turned and faced head-on that culture's divisive, abject drumbeat of despair so ingrained in the political establishment and their media acolytes. In that confrontational moment, he suggested that the political emperors indeed had no clothes, they had nothing to offer us except the human corrosion generated by a rabid social system where the desperate many were unrelentingly exploited by the decadent few, a process he brilliantly captured in *The Hard Road to Renewal*. Here, also, he articulated a clear, emancipatory position. Despite the soul-crunching politics of the last four decades, a neoliberal victory was not inevitable. Everything was

contestable, contingent and contradictory, and, above all, winnable.

For many, his interventions in the macro world of media, culture and politics made him a public intellectual. This is true but it only captures part of his life. Intervening in the micro world of the public was equally important to him. This was most evident in his role as a teacher. Here, there was a gracious magnanimity, a sensitivity of spirit and a sense of fun that coursed, Zen-like, through his teaching veins. He never preached but pointed the way. He would not make the journey for us by telling us *what* to think; rather he suggested strategies about *how* to think. He was as equally committed to, and as comfortable with, teaching a dozen students on a Saturday morning at an Open University day school as he was participating in international conferences. There was no tokenism involved in his teaching. In his interactions with students, he was, in the Buddhist sense, egoless and genuinely mindful and respectful towards them in their yearning for learning and in the redemptive possibilities, and new beginnings, that education could forge for them.

Like Marx, Stuart used ironic humour – never lip-curling sarcasm – to charming but devastating effect. For those who were on the other side of his politics, the comments made by Engels at Marx's funeral resonate across the decades: 'though he had many opponents, he had hardly one personal enemy.' He provided a glimpse of something magically different when hearts and minds could be attuned to the soaring possibilities of what it means to be human, to be alive and to be united in a political and cultural project that could have limitless, emancipatory outcomes. In his work, fear does not eat the soul. Rather hope and imagination provide the succour that allows the soul and spirit to flourish.

When Stuart spoke poignantly about the passing of Raymond Williams he said that 'those of us who had the privilege to know him personally, to read his work, to talk and argue with him, to be formed, intellectually and politically, in his shadow, hardly know how to express or where to put our sense of the enormity of that loss'. So too with Stuart's passing. In the notes written for his film, *The Stuart Hall Project*, John Akofrah borrows an elegiac phrase delivered at Malcolm X's funeral and applies it to Stuart's life: 'in honouring him, we honour the best in ourselves'. Another elegiac phrase was used at Malcolm's funeral which also applies to Stuart's life. Like Malcolm, Stuart planted a 'seed – which, after the winter of our discontent, will come forth again to meet us'. And so while we can no longer physically be in Stuart's presence, we can honour his life, and the seed he planted, not just in our individual dreams but in our collective imagination and in our actions. In the trembling grief and ache of this moment, we cannot ask for any more than that. ■

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