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Frosh, Stephen (2023) Stuart Hall, Jacqueline Rose and the politics of the psyche. *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* , ISSN 1088-0763.

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Stuart Hall, Jacqueline Rose and the Politics of the Psyche

Abstract

This article is a report on a lecture given in London by Professor Jacqueline Rose on 11th February 2023, organised by the Stuart Hall Foundation as the 6th Annual Stuart Hall Public Conversation. The lecture was entitled *What is a Subject? Politics and Psyche After Stuart Hall* and was responded to by Dr Sharon Numa. In this lecture, Jacqueline Rose identifies a powerful stream of psychoanalytic thought in Stuart Hall's writings and articulates a contemporary understanding of Hall's work as reaching out to what she calls 'some of the most anguished political and cultural realities of our current times.'

Stuart Hall, Jacqueline Rose and the Politics of the Psyche¹

It is hard to capture the *effect* of Stuart Hall; this can certainly not be achieved by merely outlining his life story. But to start with that: Stuart Hall was born in Jamaica in 1932, a child of colonialism and the independence movement; he came to Britain as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University in 1951, though his political mobilisation in the later 1950s led him to give up his PhD (into Henry James) and instead focus on critical social theory and political activism. He was the first editor of *New Left Review*, the most important instigator of cultural studies, and a major theorist and protagonist for the antiracist movement. His writings, which were frequently collaborative (Claire Alexander (2009, p.461) refers to ‘the preference for collaborative production and for short, critical interventions into theoretical and political endeavour’), often had a provisional, open feel yet were immensely fertile in developing and advancing new modes of Gramscian-inspired Marxist thought. As well as cultural studies, he might be understood as a progenitor of diasporic studies; and we can also think of him as a major contributor to the burgeoning field of identity studies – so long as it is remembered that his model of identity was one of ‘becoming’ rather than ‘being’, of ‘identification’ more than ‘identity’; which means to say, it celebrated contradiction, resistance and flux.

But as I say, vitally important as all this is – Hall was a major scholar and deserves continued recognition as such – the *effect* of Stuart Hall went far further. Alexander (2009, p. 457), describing the response to Hall when he rose to speak at the *Race Matters* conference in Princeton in 1994, writes, ‘It was the only time I have ever witnessed someone getting a standing ovation for simply saying their name.’ I recall events in his older age, sometimes in the midst of illness, where he would appear perhaps to review a day of conference papers. The audience would, simply, *settle*. Jacqueline Rose, in her wonderful lecture on Hall’s thinking, said: ‘I am sure I am not alone in finding talks by Hall exhilarating in ways I could never quite understand given that the news he relayed with such energy was almost unremittingly dire.’ Exactly: since Hall’s death in 2014 many of us have thought this. When he was alive, he became an object of reverence, someone who could spontaneously and lucidly put his finger on the pulse of contemporary life; and, especially, he offered a kind of acerbic and critical, yet inclusive and generous, vision of a world that was broken but could possibly, with the right energies and orientation, be put right. ‘So *that’s* how it works,’ we might think, listening to his exposition of the latest ‘conjuncture’ of forces; ‘so that’s what solidarity means, that’s what we have to do.’ Since his death, he has often functioned as a benevolent ghost for radicals trying to find their bearings. Rose again: ‘I am sure I am not the only person who has often, as the crises of the times unfold, found themselves thinking – if only we could hear what he has to say.’ When Hall died, in 2014, his widow Catherine commented on how astonishing it was to receive attestations of love for him from all over the world; there was, in fact, nothing surprising about this at all.

Hall was a significant ‘public intellectual’, speaking both to scholarly communities and to activist and general ones. Jacqueline Rose, who was invited by the Stuart Hall Foundation to give their annual lecture in 2023, is another. Hall’s terrain was primarily that of race and racism; Rose’s is there too

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but with a larger space for theorising gender, sexuality and sexism; but both were and are concerned with the implication of the political in the lives of people and in the workings of culture; both understood and understand the operation of violence and prejudice in the production of personal suffering and in the maintenance of state control; both were and are great readers of texts; and both were and are inspirational speakers. Hall and Rose also relate to psychoanalysis from the position of cultural critics, but here there does seem to be a difference. Rose's whole academic career has demonstrated a deep engagement with psychoanalytic thought, substantively in the study of Freud, Klein and Lacan but also as a means to open up understanding of literature, culture and politics. Hall, however, on the face of it at least, came late to a full appreciation of what psychoanalysis might offer to these fields. Rose quotes from Hall's 1987 paper *Psychoanalysis and Cultural Studies* (Hall, 1987/2018, p.891), that cultural studies 'walked and talked and looked at and attempted to analyse a culture, a human society as if it had no sexuality, as if the subjects of culture were unsexed,' and then comments that since Hall 'is one of the founders of Cultural Studies, I think it is fair to say that the person he is criticising here must also be himself.' Yet despite the sociological and cultural studies focus of Hall's work, there was always something stirring that suggested an openness to psychoanalysis, especially (though ambivalently) in its Lacanian form, and he did not try to hide this even though he did not foreground it. In the late 1980s he was generous enough to appear on a panel where I was discussing my first book, *The Politics of Psychoanalysis* (Frosh, 1987), suggesting that he was intrigued even then by that combination. I remember inviting him in the mid-1990s to speak at a Scientific Meeting of the Tavistock Clinic, an event chaired by his sister-in-law, the psychotherapist Margaret Rustin, who described him as 'a great conversationalist'. In this talk, he gave his audience of psychoanalysts, psychotherapists and family therapists a masterclass in Althusser and Lacan alongside a deeply incisive examination of the construction of racialised identities. 'What a mind!' was one exclamation I heard on the way out; and whilst this might have been a typically defensive way of admiring someone and ignoring their message, it was also true and a measure of the impact this 'outsider' could have on the psychoanalytic establishment.

Jacqueline Rose's Stuart Hall Foundation talk, entitled *What is a Subject? Politics and Psyche After Stuart Hall*, is both an encounter with contemporary politics through Hall's work and an examination of the place of psychoanalysis in his writings. What Rose manages in her talk is to share a realisation that comes to her as she reads:

As I started to read and re-read Stuart Hall's writing for this lecture, I realised I had been utterly unprepared for how quickly and fully the vocabulary of psychoanalysis – amnesia, disavowal, misrecognition, fantasy – starts to saturate the scene of politics. Before we know where we are – certainly before he knows where or who he is – the building blocks of an incipient psychoanalytic project are in place.

This is a striking comment because however much we might see Hall as open to psychoanalysis, it is not common to read his writings as intrinsically psychoanalytic, as a 'psychoanalytic project'; indeed, many readers seem very uncertain about the claim that he was particularly enamoured of psychoanalytic ideas (both reviewers of this article make this point). Yet Rose's claim about this is given with conviction and with exact grounding in Hall's writing, and it makes a lot of difference to how we might think of Hall's work, and indeed to our understanding of what a 'psychoanalytic project' might be or might become.

It begins with two connected ideas: those of borders (and their transgression) and haunting. On the former, Rose starts with Hall's reminiscence of his experience as he arrived in England, described beautifully in John Akomfrah's (2013) film *The Stuart Hall Project*. Rose quotes the version from *Familiar Stranger* (2017): as Hall passes Paddington Station, she says, he sees 'a stream of black people pouring out into the London afternoon.' 'Too poorly dressed to be tourists, ...who were they,' he asks (p.152), 'and what were they doing here?' This was of course an identity question for Hall himself – what was he doing 'here'? – as well as a prescient appreciation of the dramatic change that the Windrush generation would bring to the social fabric of the UK. For Rose, it is also a recognition of the permeability of boundaries and of the way this allows ghosts to function: 'So what is a subject?' she asks, 'Unmistakeably, in this instance, to be haunted.' The Caribbean that Hall had left came to meet him in England, forcing itself on his consciousness and opening up a relationship to blackness that had lifelong consequences and led, in a kind of *Nachträglichkeit*, to a powerful analysis of colonialism and of national and diasporic identities and, indeed, the deconstruction of identity itself, or at least its reconstruction as an ever-emerging process of becoming that looks backwards and forwards and is always open. 'When I ask people where they come from nowadays,' Hall says in *The Stuart Hall Project*, 'I expect to receive a very long answer.' This multifariousness or hybridity (in Hall's case he traced *at least* Jamaican, English, Portuguese, African and Jewish ancestries) not only alerted Hall to racialised politics and possibly contributed to the extraordinary inclusivity of his thought; it also indicates a route through which past experiences haunt present consciousness, linking personal and family lives with wider social histories, especially of past 'trauma' or oppression. For Rose, this is already a way into the unconscious. She quotes *Familiar Stranger* again: 'I sometimes wonder if inside my family life this displaced larger history was in some way being restaged, in its own theatre, with its own disturbing psychic properties' (Hall, 2017, p.57). This allows her to make a connection that is not always made, in which Hall's thought is portrayed as articulated in relation to a psychoanalytic awareness of the unconscious, however dominated it might have seemed by its overtly sociological and political dimensions.

Rose identifies Hall's 'familial silence on Jamaican history, above all his mother's accommodation with the drastic forms of racial inequalities which were, and in many ways still are today, its ongoing legacy' as playing a key role in his decision to leave Jamaica. That decision could also, as Hall allows, be seen as fulfilling his mother's aspiration that he should find himself in the place *she* idealised, colonial Britain. Much psychoanalytic interpretation is possible from here, but this is not Rose's point. Instead, her focus is on Hall's awareness of the necessity to move beyond Marxist economic orthodoxies to develop a Gramscian understanding of the workings of ideology and to further that project in the light of a nuanced vision of how the disruptiveness of the psychoanalytic unconscious might function in political and cultural life. Rose points out how strongly Hall embraces a project that examines the past in order to free the present from it – a quintessentially psychoanalytic project, though framed at the level of the social – and also how this both deploys a psychoanalytically-informed sensitivity and challenges psychoanalysis to question its own stuttering engagement with racialised histories and presents. For Rose, this project is now under way, and there is some evidence for this (Frosh, 2023). But what also attracts her to the psychoanalytic undertones in Hall's writing is his refusal to promote what we might term 'ego mastery', loosely translatable as a politics of uniformity and control. For Hall, *hybridity* is a gift, muddying waters, creating piebald consciousness, or in Hall's own words, 'mess'. 'Only if you confront the "mess" of things,' Rose says, 'delve beneath the surface, let in the silenced voices of history clamouring at the gate, is there the

slightest prospect of understanding, let alone transforming, the nightmares of our contemporary world.’ This has resonances of Judith Butler’s (2012) use of Walter Benjamin’s notion of the messianic as involving the ‘flashing up’ of past, occluded voices; if this is not quite Hall’s genealogy, it is nevertheless a link between radical perceptions. The polyvocality of the past and of the unconscious both need expression if there is to be resistance to the heavy hand of authoritarian control. Rose comments, ‘Identities that flounder are the bearers of a psychic truth. They bear witness both to the infinite complexity of psychic life and to our deepest implication in the ills of the world through which we must continue to struggle.’ Note the now familiar pluralising of identities here; ‘mess’, ‘floundering’, ‘infinite complexity’, these are nowadays rightly envisioned as emancipatory ideas, linked to Hall’s ‘multiculturalism’ (before the term went out of fashion) and also to the exigencies, pains and joys of psychic being.

Rose moves on from here to read Hall’s seminal account of Thatcherism and, through that, authoritarian politics, as an essay on the destructiveness of unconscious urges when put in the service of social norms. For Rose, Hall’s innovation lies in his ‘startling and hugely influential analysis of Thatcherism, as a form of collective insanity and/or a world in hoc to the logic of the dream.’ What right-wing authoritarianism seems able to do is mobilise the more destructive impulses of the unconscious, with the anxieties these produce, in the service not of freedom – which might be the psychoanalytic ambition – but of mental and political closure. Exploring the manipulations of consciousness that lead people to vote against their interests, and especially articulating ways in which ‘militant nationalism’ is evoked as a response to imperial decline and works through projecting hatred into migrant and minoritised others (‘Imperial decline coupled with recession gave racism its cue’), Rose’s summary point binds together the political and the subjective, showing why Hall attracted the ire of some unreconstructed Leftists but also offered an account that is truly and progressively ‘psychosocial’ as well as cogently psychoanalytic.

For many, amongst whom I include myself, the radical potential of psychoanalysis is rooted in its critique and disruption of what passes for the norm. Under Thatcherism – indeed this is the very kernel of the analysis – the forces tapped by psychoanalysis are instead conscripted into the norm’s service. The originality and boldness of this analysis cannot, I believe, be overstated.

Against the conformist norms that Rose is referencing here, what psychoanalysis and critical politics both posit is the necessity of opening the mind, of overcoming internal resistance to change. Previously, Rose has described better than anyone the relationship between psychoanalytic resistance and political resistance, which are in some ways at odds with one another.

If in political vocabularies, resistance is the passage to freedom, for psychoanalysis, it is repetition, blockage, blind obeisance to crushing internal constraint. ... In this vocabulary, then, resistance is not the action of the freedom fighter, the struggle against tyranny, the first stirring of the oppressed; it is the mind at war with itself, blocking the path to its own freedom and, with it, its ability to make the world a better, less tyrannical, place. (Rose, 2007, p.21)

Resistance in psychoanalysis is something to be overcome, which also involves first understanding what it is about. Rose presents the authoritarian mind as full of resistance to freedom, to the terror produced by deep and truthful thought which does not back away from reality. Fascism is ‘a carapace against what the mind should, ideally, be able to do with itself. Something shuts down, closes cruelly into its allotted and unmovable place’ (ibid.). The task of psychoanalysis therefore, is

to break down such resistance, which is precisely *not* tolerant of difference; rather, it is specifically, rigidly *defensive*, closing off possibilities. For Hall, this was true of politics too: the modes of resistance that might work are those that recognise the ‘ruptured’ nature of the social world. What makes diversity a central concern is the recognition that the psyche and society are hybrid and fluid, and the uncertainty this produces is also a source of the anxiety that makes authoritarianism so reassuring. Lacan might have called this the Discourse of the Master; Hall (who was knowledgeable about Lacan as well as about Althusser and Gramsci), emphasises more simply the ‘sliding’ of identities, the way that life has to be lived ‘in the conditional tense.’ Rose comments, ‘Hall, we could say, is trying to let as much air and movement into our political and psychic lives as is humanly possible, which might also do as his definition of culture in and of itself.’

There is much more ground covered in Jacqueline Rose’s critical appreciation of Hall. The key issues for her, reading with and extending Hall’s psychosocial-psychoanalytic-cultural studies flux, are different kinds of what Walter Dignolo (2000) called ‘border thinking’, specifically the national border-crossing that is involved in migrancy and the social, cultural and psychosexual border crossing that is intrinsic to trans*. Rose tracks what Hall had to say on the former and adds her own gloss to the latter; for her, ‘in both cases, as I see it, mobility is being confronted by dogmatism in new and deeply troubling ways.’ As Rose notes, Hall was prescient on the contemporary ‘crisis’ of migrancy, which is both a real crisis for forced migrants and an imagined, manipulated one for the states that scapegoat them and maliciously turn them away in a righteous rhetoric of abandonment. Hall identified twenty and thirty years ago that migrancy was a product of globalisation – its ‘underside’, as Rose quotes – and that those forced by wars as well as by the marginalisation of now-peripheral ways of living to move across borders, provide a convenient scapegoat for the multiple problems of globalised capitalism and for the anxiety produced by the unsettlement of contemporary lives. The response to migration is deeply racialised and so connected to the heart of Hall’s project of keeping the categories of ‘race’, culture and identity open, not allowing them to be stifled by resistance to heterogeneity or by the malevolent politics that feeds on social anxiety. What is observable here is ‘the mind at war with itself’, but now writ large as a fantasy of being overwhelmed (‘swarms’ of migrants, to reference the throwaway line of a previous British Prime Minister). What Hall and Rose give us is an analytic vocabulary that demonstrates how the political convenience of locking down borders fits with the psychic defence of screening out the troubling interconnectedness of everyone and everything, and making it into the us-them dynamic so loved by right-wing populists because of the ease with which it can be used for the homogenising of group life.

The trans* experience was not part of Hall’s wide-ranging analysis and sexual difference was itself a relatively neglected area, especially in his earlier work, even though he eventually commented on and interacted with feminist thought. For Rose, trans* is now a crucial instance of border-crossing, revealing the temptation to refuse *emancipatory* difference in the name of *normative* difference and to engage in a politics of naming that fixes people without allowing them to breathe. ‘As with the refugees redefined as “illegal” or “irregular” migrants, wiping their history off the page,’ she says, ‘it is the vocative voice – “I will tell you who you are” – that is, for me, the crime, surely at odds with any politics being fought in the name of freedom.’ This is strongly reminiscent of Judith Butler’s examination of ‘ethical violence’, positioning others in line with one’s own version of them. Butler’s emancipatory version of this is given here:

By not pursuing satisfaction and by letting the question remain open, even enduring, we let the other live, since life might be understood as precisely that which exceeds any account we may try to give of it. If letting the other live is part of any ethical definition of recognition, then this version of recognition will be based less on knowledge than on an apprehension of epistemic limits. (Butler, 2005, p.42)

To use the quote from Hall that Rose finishes her talk with, this is to construct a 'critical politics [...] which is always a politics of criticism.' The attack on trans* is part of the fixing process of an uncritical politics of resistance to the multiplicities of social and psychic life; both these great intellectuals speak to the necessity and possibility of a different kind of resistance, resistance to resistance, one might say, a politics of freedom.

In her response to Rose's talk, the British psychoanalyst Sharon Numa identified anxiety as a primary concern in Rose's paper, addressing it through the Kleinian tradition rather than the Lacanian one that Rose evoked, a point that the two interlocutors discussed. This seems a well-chosen address, linking through to the politics of anxiety that helps drive antagonism to migrancy and trans* and that helps fuel racist thought. The usefulness of embracing a clinical dimension in this discussion was evident: we could see in it how the resonance of psychoanalytic understanding might move from its deep immersion in the clinic into explicating the fantasies that are deployed in social and political life. This discussion brought out the centrality of mourning and of the refusal to grieve as complicit with the production of violence and included debates about 'integration' as an aim of psychoanalysis, Hall's focus on *identification* rather than identity, and the complexity of the notion of 'reparation', with its potentially punitive (*reparations*) as well as restitutive components. I won't dwell on these issues here, as they take us into some familiar psychoanalytic controversies, though it is worth noting the point raised by Rose and Numa that the Kleinian idea of reparation leads to questions of repairing damage and of social justice in the face of the impulse towards forgetting the violence that underpins the nation state. But what was enunciated most powerfully was the necessity for *solidarity*. How can we move to a collective identification with others who are oppressed? How can psychoanalysis help us advance an emancipatory set of identifications? How do we navigate between 'you are the same as me' (colonisation) and 'I am the same as you' (destitution), a major point in the psychoanalytic study of witnessing and testimony to trauma? The question here, revolving through many of our current disputes, is how the mind can be opened and how the social can be activated in such a way that the kind of solidarity that Stuart Hall worked for all his life can be made real.

Conflict of Interest

The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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