

# An interventionist sociologist: Stuart Hall, public engagement and racism

The Sociological Review

1–15

© The Author(s) 2022



Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/00380261221108584

[journals.sagepub.com/home/sor](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/sor)**Karim Murji**

School of Human and Social Sciences, University of West London, UK

**Abstract**

While Stuart Hall is often acknowledged as a public intellectual, it is argued here that a better way of understanding his practice is as an interventionist, whose public engagements are always set in a specific context. This way of seeing Hall is drawn on his own words and from approaches to intellectual work that foreground how scholars present themselves. Combining this approach with Hall's own reading of Gramsci as a grounded intellectual, this article then illustrates the idea of Hall as an interventionist sociologist through three examples of his public works on race and racism, exemplifying his well-known use of conjunctural analysis. Thus, the purpose of this article is twofold: first it seeks to 'disambiguate' Hall from the public intellectual label; and secondly in resituating him it highlights his public engagements on race as interventions *in* and *as* sociology.

**Keywords**

biography, multiculturalism, nation, public sociology, race

Both in his lifetime and after Stuart Hall was widely characterised as a public intellectual. This is a recurring theme in the large number of tributes and publications attesting to Hall's influence and reach through his many academic and public projects that combine a wide range of speaking and publishing engagements, as well as a remarkable public pedagogy through Open University teaching. The span and depth of Hall's activities underlines that he was always more than an 'ivory tower' scholar, over more than five decades.<sup>1</sup> As a whole, his profile marks a 'unique ability to cross the boundaries between academia and the wider public spheres of politics, art and the cultural industries [and] help situate Hall as a public intellectual in the broadest sense of that term' (Solomos,

**Corresponding author:**

Karim Murji, School of Human and Social Sciences, University of West London, Paragon House, 4th floor, Boston Manor Road, London, TW8 9GA, UK.

Email: [Karim.murji@uwl.ac.uk](mailto:Karim.murji@uwl.ac.uk)

2014, p. 1667), making him one of few ‘truly public intellectuals’ (Alexander, 2009, p. 462). Calling Hall a public intellectual seems obvious, yet he has also been seen as a vernacular, a critical, a diasporic, an organic or a nonconformist intellectual – a profusion of terms that invite the question of what kind of intellectual he was. The multiple labels are unsurprising considering the extent of Hall’s oeuvre, but despite all the scholarly interest in him there is a notable absence when it comes to disentangling the question of what it means to place him as a public intellectual, or how useful that term is. The first part of this article tackles this issue.

The idea of public intellectuals is useful in general terms, but the argument made here is that locating Hall within that is open to some ambiguity, and that there is a more precise way of understanding his engagements. Eyal and Buchholz (2010) argue that a sociology of (public) intellectuals is being replaced by, or better thought of as, a sociology of interventions. In seeking to reposition Hall in this frame, maintaining that it chimes better with his own commentary on his practice, this article follows Bourdieu’s view ‘that defining intellectuals is less important than exploring how intellectuals define themselves’ (cited in Kurzman & Owens 2002, p. 80). Of course, in many ways all public intellectuals can be thought of as intervening in public debates so this word could be thought of as a banality. However, in Hall’s case it is not incidental or trite, but a critical modality – and this is reflected in his own words. Hall’s (1986) reflections on Gramsci, which he uses to draw out some implications for analysing race and racism, further frame this idea about the specificity of intellectual interventions. This then sets the ground for an examination of three instances of Hall’s public engagements on racism, ranging across decades, that reveal how Hall ‘operationalised’ his reading of Gramsci. The examples employed are either less known, not analysed as a group and/or not in the framework offered here.<sup>2</sup> This article proposes that these engagements elucidate Hall’s interventions *as* a sociologist, as well as *in* sociology.<sup>3</sup> These interventions occur as a dialogue with classical sociologists that pre-date his appointment as a Professor of Sociology in 1979 (e.g. see Hall, 1977<sup>4</sup>), as well as expanding the scope of what could be sociology through his wide engagements with linguistics, post-structuralism and psychoanalysis. For Hall, sociology, as he presented it in his Open University inaugural lecture, is a discipline that is ‘trying to write contemporary history’, providing ‘an insight into social processes that question the obvious. . . . So I think sociology is . . . by definition the critical edge, even to its own assumptions’ (in Mullan, 1987, p. 249). Whatever he was writing about – media and culture, race and ethnicity, or the state and politics – the expansive frame of reference, combined with a critical analytical perspective of the present marks out Hall’s sociology as ‘theoretically informed concrete studies’(in Mullan, 1987, p. 253).

## Disambiguating Hall: More than a public intellectual

To suggest an author so widely discussed as Stuart Hall could need some disambiguation may seem curious or strange. Yet, while he is widely called a public intellectual the precise meaning of that, or of what type, does not appear to have been interrogated by others. It is obvious that Hall was a scholar who had multiple activities beyond the academy, but to label this public intellectualism is true only in the banal sense that conjoining his scholarly role with numerous public engagements makes it so. Of course, the term is usually used to identify something more than that, and it is this broader tradition (Kurzman & Owens,

2002) that Hall is being linked to, albeit imprecisely. His biography as well as his practice – what he actually did in public roles – makes Hall a perhaps unique, or at least a distinctive kind of intellectual practitioner, which the broad term public intellectual glosses over. In clearing the ground en route to viewing Hall as an interventionist, other blurred boundaries emerge, such as his location within race and ethnicity studies. His relationship to labels and to academic fields is ‘a wavy line’ rather than a direct connection (to misappropriate a phrase Hall [1982] used in a different context), making him an interstitial or ambiguous figure in the sociology of intellectuals, and as a theorist of racism.

Assessments of public intellectualism are subject to attempts to both breathe new life into it (Baert, 2015) as well as ongoing critiques. The latter, in both gentler and more forceful forms, tend to see it as an outdated term, particularly in a multi-mediated landscape (Eyal & Buchholz, 2010; Fatsis, 2018). I share Eyal and Buchholz’s (2010) view that it is invoked in ways that tend to dichotomise the academic or scholarly from the real world or treat intellectuals as a specific class. It is often conjoined to a narrative of decline – a sense that there was once an active public sphere in which scholars were important, speaking ‘truth to power’, but that this is no longer the case. (Though this is not new and disillusionment with intellectuals has been a refrain since the beginning of the 20th century; see Kurzman & Owens, 2002). Hence, discussions around public intellectuals ‘often read like a recital of lamentations, jeremiads and dramatic tales that describe the fall, betrayal, disappearance, decline and absence of intellectuals’ (Fatsis, 2018, p. 269).

In their overview of the field Kurzman and Owens (2002) identify three main approaches or ways of thinking about public intellectuals: seeing them as bearers of a particular class; as a class in themselves; or as a class representing others. To which of these three types could Hall be attached? While the young man who went to Oxford as a Rhodes scholar in 1951, and became associated with the New Left there, fits the elitism of the first type, his middle-class background set him apart to an extent, as does his ethnicity and origins (‘I sometimes feel like the last colonial’, as he put it [Hall, 2017a, p. 3]). Like many ‘raced’ colonial migrants, he stood at one remove, or at an angle, to both the class and race/ethnicity milieu he found himself in. He described this sense of feeling out of place not just as a new arrival (see Hall, 2007) but also as a lifelong condition or sense of self:

I felt out of place in Jamaica, and when I came to England I felt out of place in Merton College, Oxford, and I feel out of place even now. I feel out of place in relation to the British, which might sound a very strange thing because I’ve lived here for 50-something years. I know the different kinds of English, the British people, I know how the society works from the inside. I love parts of the landscape. I feel at one with it. It is my home in a certain kind of way. But I will never be English, never. I can’t be, because traces in my life, and the traces in my memory and the traces in my history of another place are just ineradicable. I can’t get them out of my head. I don’t want to have a fight about it, but that’s just how one is. So being displaced, or out of place, is a characteristic experience of mine. (Hall & Back, 2009, p. 669)

Seeing Hall as an ‘outsider’, or rather his own feeling of that, is underscored in a testimony from one of his collaborators, Martin Jacques, who says that Hall ‘never felt at home in Britain. . . . Because of his colour and origin, he saw the country differently, not as a native but as an outsider. He observed this island through a different viewfinder and

it enabled him to see things that those shaped and formatted by the culture could not. It took an outsider, a black person from a former colony, to understand what was happening to a post-imperial country seemingly locked in endless decline' (Jacques, 2017, p. 174). Thus, when Hall wrote that: 'We all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific. What we say is always "in context", positioned' (Hall, 1994, p. 222), he highlights both his own positionality as well as a duality, or what could be thought of as a Du Boisian 'double consciousness' (Back & Tate, 2015). It also connects to the view that the unrooted or unattached thinker 'scarcely inclines intellectuals to conceptualize the sense of social position, still less their own social position' (Bourdieu, cited in Kurzman & Owens, 2002, p. 78). These points do not in themselves undermine using the designation of public intellectual, but they make it clearer that if that frame is to be employed Hall would be better seen as something like a Saidian intellectual – an outsider 'whose place it is publicly to . . . confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to produce them)', which Said (1994) also saw as 'represent[ing] all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug'.

What of the second and third types of public intellectualism in Kurzman and Owens (2002)? Hall took part in many collective projects – probably most notably, the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) – so he could be regarded as part of a class of intellectuals. While two of the three public interventions discussed in the second part of this article are individual rather than collective, collaboration is a feature of Hall's intellectual signature. This is true literally as co-authorship, as well as a sense of creating dialogues – a role that is underscored by colleagues he worked closely with (e.g. Clarke, 2014, 2015<sup>5</sup>). LesBack's observation (in Hall & Back, 2009, p. 659) nicely captures this in seeing Hall's work as 'always sociable, a collective activity that happens in dialogue with others forming part of a larger conversation that also transforms those around him'. True as that is, it is the case that Hall's restless engagement with the present made him less part of a class than an intellectual figurehead, as the many respects paid to him provide extensive evidence of. Equally it is open to question if in Hall's many scholarly and public activities we can ever say he belonged to a particular group, rather than many groups and projects. While he was sometimes placed as a kind of spokesperson for the West Indian or black community in Britain, there is little sign that he accepted a role of speaking 'on behalf of' people.

Thus, of the three approaches, Hall seems closest to the idea of the Gramscian public intellectual; given his own engagement with Gramsci there would be grounds for that, and he did accept that it is the responsibility of intellectuals to transmit ideas and knowledge. But even here there is a problem. Can Hall be thought of as a class organiser or an organic intellectual? Given his origins, his pre-academic life as a teacher, and his many engagements there would be a case to regard him as an intellectual formed not just through scholarly work, but also by experience and oppression, not least racism, enabling him to articulate the political consciousness of a subaltern group. Treating Hall as an organic intellectual is though difficult in various respects. One is that he is quite clear (Hall, 2017a) that his family and class background does not simply connect him to the Windrush generation who started to arrive only three years before him, as well as the West Indians who migrated to Britain in the following years. Race and class intersect but they do not correspond in a direct manner (Alexander, 2009). Besides, Hall cast doubt on

this himself, not in conceptual but practical terms saying that the CCCS were ‘trying to find an institutional practice in cultural studies that would produce an organic intellectual . . . we weren’t sure we would recognize him or her if we managed to produce it’ (Hall, 1996, p. 266). The very idea, as he adds, seems to align intellectuals with an emerging historical movement, yet they had no such point of reference (Hall, 1996).

Questioning the usefulness of the public intellectual label as a way of placing Hall opens up other ways of locating him. One would be as a specific intellectual (Foucault, 1977), who rejects the role of speaking for others, who focuses on the specific rather than the general, and who is aware of her/himself as both a subject and object of power. Focusing on specificity illuminates Hall’s activism as well as his reflexivity. However, in terms of interdisciplinary breadth, Hall may, like Said, be better understood as a general intellectual (Brennan, 2021). Another track would be to regard Hall as a public sociologist, as the idea has been developed by Burawoy (2005). Hall’s many connections beyond and within the academy, combining theory and practice and ranging from his writings about authoritarian populism and New Labour, to his involvement with campaigns around policing and racism, all carry the hallmark of a critical public sociologist.

Hall’s numerous contributions on race and racism are evident in the comprehensive bibliography of his work.<sup>6</sup> Oddly, however, there is some equivocation about his place as a scholar of racism, as well as the role of race in his life. A reason for this, and probably typically for him, is the sheer diversity of where he made these interventions – short articles, radio interviews and broadcasts – as well as the gap between the when he spoke and when something was published, such as the extensive lectures he gave at Harvard in 1994 but that were not published till 2017 (Hall, 2017b). So, his works on race can be widely cited and seemingly marginal at the same time. For instance, Alexander (2009, p. 458) writes, ‘It is almost impossible to overestimate the significance of Stuart Hall in shaping the field of racial and ethnic studies in the past four decades. . . . [He] has been a foundational figure for scholars in Britain, the US, the Caribbean and beyond, in opening new avenues for thinking about race, politics, culture and identity’, while later adding, ‘there has been surprisingly little concentrated critical engagement with Hall’s theories of race and ethnicity’ (Alexander, 2009, p. 459). Further evidence of this appears in a tribute noting that, ‘less recognized was the influence that his theoretical perspective had on the field of race and ethnic studies. His contributions to this field have been in general less well documented, given the tendency to see his work through the lens of his broader intellectual profile than his specific contributions to race and ethnic studies’ (Solomos, 2014, p. 1668).

Race is indeed troubling in more than one respect in placing Hall, and how he has been placed, not least in view of the surprise sometimes evident from some people on learning that he was black, which for Gilroy (2021) reflects the seeming impossibility of being (seen as) a black intellectual. Hall talks of being recognised as such only through his encounter with the (white) Left in Britain, as a ‘struggle to come to terms with that experience, which is when I first discovered I was a black intellectual. I’d never called myself black ever in my life, nor did most Jamaican people’ (Hall & Back, 2009, p. 662). Hall saw his departure from the Caribbean as formative of perhaps his entire intellectual career, yet Farred (1997) could maintain that race was marginal to Hall’s early work. But by 2016<sup>7</sup> Farred acknowledges race as ‘critical and formative . . . to Hall’s thinking from

the very earliest moment, certainly from the very moment of his entrée into British political and intellectual life' (Farred, 2016, p. 655), while also observing 'the inadequacies and inaccuracies of extant scholarship on Hall and race' (p. 655). More questionably, Farred claims 'a sharp disjuncture between Hall's public interventions – his television appearances – into race (racial conflict, racialized policing) in postimperializing Britain and his written oeuvre' (p. 655). As this article stresses, the public interventions are about more than TV appearances, confronting race was a theme for Hall from the outset, and his public interventions are not separate from his academic work.

## **Grounding an interventionist sociology**

Rather than searching for a 'right' or 'true' category or term for Hall as an intellectual, the approach here relies more on Hall's own words, as well as a specific text – his 1986 article on the significance of Gramsci for race and ethnicity studies. These sources provide two clues to Hall's public engagements on racism. First they bring out some elements of Gramsci's intellectual practice that have a direct read through to Hall himself, as a grounded and specific interventionist. Second, in pointing to several ways that Gramsci can orient and frame analyses of racism with a distinct theoretical perspective, as Hall calls it, we can see how Hall's public texts on racism correspond to the lessons he outlined there. Although that work is largely a theoretical exercise (and notwithstanding questions about how Hall understood and employed Gramsci; Anderson, 2017; Davidson, 2008), I suggest that Hall was employing this framework in ways that demonstrate his critical practice as a public figure and sociologist.

Referring to Hall's own sense of his practice whether in academic or in public work is illuminating (e.g. see Hall, 2007). When he said that: 'I think my object is to think the concreteness of the object in its many different relations' (Hall, cited in Grossberg, 2007, p. 99), this is taken up by many others. For instance, Finlayson (2019) notes that, for Hall, 'events always came first. . . . Theoretically informed [his work] never allows the desire for conceptual elegance to restrict attentiveness to the thickness of our multiform political reality' (2019, p. 229). Likewise, Clarke (2015, p. 282) sees Hall as engaged in 'discovering necessary elements in many different places and seeing what might happen if they were put together to illuminate pressing analytical and political issues'. In each moment the purpose of analysis is to retain the specificity and details of the present moment without reducing it just to empirical details (Grossberg, 2007).

This perspective on Hall connects to his own reading of Gramsci.<sup>8</sup> When Hall spoke of analysing 'things that are in front of you and try[ing] to understand how they really are and not how you would like them to be', we can see a direct read through to his observation of Gramsci, as 'constantly using theory to illuminate concrete historical cases or political questions; or thinking large concepts in terms of their application to concrete and specific situations'. Gramsci's work, he adds, 'often appears almost too concrete: too historically specific, too delimited in its references, too "descriptively" analytic, too time and context-bound. His most illuminating ideas and formulations are typically of this conjunctural kind' (Hall, 1986, p. 6). Concepts like conjuncture and hegemony are what Hall famously developed from Gramsci, though the point here is that Hall also saw himself as a 'sort of writer about the "history of the present"' (Hall & Back, 2009, p. 664). In his public roles Hall connects this attention to the present through a form of radical contextualising, which Slack



(1996, p. 126) views as mapping ‘the very identity that brings the context into focus’. Thus, context is not just something out there or an empty space to be filled in, it is something that has to be assembled for the purposes of analysis. Like Gramsci, whose work Hall saw as ‘developed out of this more organic engagement with his own society and times and was always intended to serve, not an abstract academic purpose, but the aim of informing political practice’ (Hall, 1986, p. 5), Hall’s sociology is aimed at critically assessing the present. This makes him, again as in his view of Gramsci, not a general theorist whose work ‘can be applied to the analysis of social phenomena across a wide comparative range of historical societies . . . [but whose] work is, precisely, of a sophisticating kind’ (1986, p. 5). It seems to me Hall’s work is also of this kind, and it underlies the feeling of how and why Hall is seen as both too big and too small as a thinker (Carrington, 2019).

Hall talked of his own inputs as ‘interventions in a field, rather than autonomous scholarly works’ (Hall & Back, 2009, p. 664), and this provides a further connection to Eyal and Buchholz’s (2010) advocacy of intervention to understand engagements by scholars. While none of the three types of intervention they outline fits Hall closely or well, the general direction suggested is useful. Following Scott’s view of Hall as less the author of theories than of interventions, Hall reflected that:

David Scott says he doesn’t read me because of cultural theory; he reads me because of my political interventions. And I realized that almost everything I write is a kind of political intervention. It may not be about politics explicitly, but it is trying to shift the terms of the debate, intervene on one side or another, clarify something, wipe some other distorting views out of place so that something else can come through. I suppose that’s critique or criticism or whatever it is, but I’m aware that it is a kind of political intervention. (Hall & Back, 2009, p. 663)

Indeed, one of his key works on race, policing and the state (Hall et al., 1978) announced itself as an intervention – at a time of febrile media coverage of mugging, but also as a diagnosis of the political moment, a year before the 1979 UK election that brought into office a Conservative party that campaigned on law and order politics and nationalism, and a key break between two conjunctures (Hall, 1980a; Hall et al., 1978). *Policing the Crisis* was at the same time also an academic intervention in the sociologies of crime and deviance, culture, and race and ethnic studies, in a sophisticated interdisciplinary form that makes it both important in and challenging to each of those sub-fields. The point about interventions is made by Winter (2018) too, but only in relation to scholarly texts, whereas I stress that his public engagements in political and policy debates went beyond that. The three instances considered illustrate his style of interventionist sociology, and this idea could probably be extended to the many other non-academic outputs on race and racism (see Gilroy & Gilmore, 2021). Framed through the lens of intervention, and conjunctural analysis or contextualising, these are the analytical threads connecting and spanning his public texts on racism.

Hall concluded the 1986 essay by sketching some implications for analysing racism that stem from his reading of Gramsci. In summary form, these are a call for: attention to the historical specificity of racism, or rather racisms, which helps to avoid homogenising or flattening it out across time and space; the importance of national characteristics and regional unevenness that restrict homogenisation and universalization, while highlighting uneven and differential impact of racism; a non-reductive approach to the relation of race

and class; a non-homogeneous view of the nature of classed subjects; and an analytic based on the non-correspondence of the economic, political and ideological. All these points, particularly the relation between race and class, and the sociological and the economic, build on the conceptual apparatus Hall had set out earlier (Hall, 1980b), and can be seen in his public engagements.

### *Young Englanders*

*Young Englanders* is a pamphlet Hall wrote for the Community Relations Commission (CRC) in 1967. It appears from the title and the cover as if it was commissioned to address what Hall calls young coloured immigrants growing up as British citizens. However, he both does and does not attend to the task in front of him. He begins it saying that any problems of young immigrants are in fact in their interactions with the host society, thus the issues are for the whole society not just minority groups. Race, he says, 'is a collective concept. Essentially race relations are relations between groups of people rather than individuals' (p. 3). He goes on to mention that young white people he was teaching in a school in the late 1950s were friendly towards him, despite taking part in the 1958 Notting Hill race riots when whites violently attacked blacks, as well as expressing crude racial stereotypes about West Indians. In other words, and in terms that Hall was not then using, he indicates a relational conception of race, and implies the contradictory and disavowed forms of racism, in a way that prefigures by more than three decades his work (Hall, 1997) on the psychosocial basis of racial stereotyping.

For young English people (meaning white) he locates this in the context of emerging youth cultures where personal contact occurs more in the leisure sphere than in workplaces. From the point of view of immigrant youngsters it occurs 'in particular parts of Britain and with particular kinds of British people' (p. 6), typically twilight areas of cities – 'deprived urban areas . . . [that have] suffered swift social decline in recent years' (p. 9). The immigrants in these areas 'encounter multiple hostilities' (p. 9) – they 'don't fit the mental and cultural landscape and . . . they are judged from the pressured position of the native families already under severe social stress' (p. 9) who fear a further decline and competition for jobs, for housing, for schools. As both groups become more isolated from one another 'mutual misconceptions and misapprehensions' develop (p. 10). Consequently, immigrant youngsters have the experience of passing between two identities, at home and in society, and of reconciling these two situations. Unlike their parents, who may still harbour hopes of returning home, there is no home elsewhere for young people. Drawing on their own resources, for Hall they rediscover 'their racial and national identities', not seeking assimilation but 'recognition on equal and honourable terms'.

Conjuncturally 1967 is, at one level, the so-called 'liberal hour' in British politics reflected in social and cultural change such as the decriminalisation of homosexuality and the Abortion Act. While the 1965 Race Relations Act was criticised as limited in outlawing discrimination in goods and services, it and its successor 1968 Act marked a significant moment in UK race politics when the then Home Secretary called for integration rather than a flattening process of assimilation for migrants (Rich, 1986). Yet this was a decade in which *The Black and White Minstrel Show* on BBC TV attracted audiences of 20 million people, as well as the infamous 'rivers of blood' speech by Enoch



Powell, whose views were backed up dockers in London marching with ‘Enoch was right’ banners (Brown, 2018).

I submit that Hall is addressing this paradoxical state of British race relations in two main ways. He makes race not an issue of individual psychology or antipathy but social structure, particularly in the declining inner cities. It is this race–class–geography nexus that makes race significant, and cleaves class co-location of black and white workers, where Hall situates common sense or everyday racism. Secondly, in pointing to the identities being forged by black or immigrant youngsters he gestures to the cultural politics of difference, setting the scene for a de-homogenising approach to minorities that prefigures his work on new ethnicities (Hall, 1991). Sociologically, Hall articulates and communicates a critical or radical contextualising analysis that centres race and class within the nation, while also observing social and cultural change in a specific moment.

The content of the CRC pamphlet has received mixed interpretations. Alexander (2009) sees it as containing ‘traces of the then dominant “race relations” paradigm . . . and of black youth as stranded “between two cultures”’, which reflects the social anthropology tendency in the British sociology of race at the time. Alexander also sees in it ‘the beginnings of Hall’s later focus on issues of representation, on practices of racist exclusion, and his insistence on the right/necessity to belong to the new nation’ (Alexander, 2009, p. 470) and this accords more with Gilroy’s (2021) reading of the text. Less noted is that Hall is not writing just about youngsters but also himself in some sense as revealed in the biographical connection made in a 2009 interview while he reflected on Young Englanders. He was, he says, in ‘flight from the Caribbean; . . . I couldn’t work out my relationship to Jamaican culture. I just couldn’t. . . . Then I “discovered my” subject, or rather it discovered me. It was Caribbeans but over here, it was the Windrush journey to here.’ In Hall’s characteristic fusing of the biographical and the political he also saw the CRC text as a way of linking ‘race in relation to class politics’, and the ‘changing political terrain’ in Britain in the 1960s, when eminent figures ‘like Raymond [Williams] and Edward Thompson, couldn’t see . . . what the emergence of a black politics was going to mean’ (Hall & Back, 2009, pp. 662, 674–675).

### *Racism and reaction*

In 1978 Hall was giving a talk to the British Sociological Association. A BBC producer aware of Hall’s work through his public appearances arranged to film this lecture, which was broadcast as one of a series of five short films, later published as a slim booklet, *Five Views of Multi-racial Britain*. In this moment Hall’s focus is much more on racism and the state, than on minorities. This as we can see from his other work (Hall et al., 1978) is the cusp between two conjunctures – the era of the Keynesian welfare state, and the dawn of Thatcherism and monetarism. In this crisis period Hall (1980a) foresaw the coming of ‘iron times’, or authoritarian popular rule in which the law-and-order state is built, central to which is the place of race in symbolising the crisis.

In the public talk, however, Hall presents the argument somewhat differently. He frames his approach temporally and spatially in the context of the national character of Britain. Race, he says, functions as part of the ‘loss of historical memory, a kind of historical

amnesia, a decisive mental repression' (1978, p. 25). The main purpose of his intervention is to stress that 'Racism is always historically specific. . . . It always assumes specific forms which arise out of the present' (p. 26). Hall stresses the peculiarities by which race issues in Britain are treated as an external problem – that started from when 'they' (immigrants) came in and having been received by British people out of 'the goodness of their hearts' (p. 24), only to see it as the cause of social decline. As he points out, this obscures the 'economic and cultural chain – in short, to be brutal, the imperialist chain' (p. 25) that binds and connects the colonial hinterlands with the core of British society – and this might be the first time he uses the well-known trope of tea and sugar: 'If the blood of the colonial workers has not mingled extensively with the English, then their labour power has long entered the economic blood stream of British society. It is in the sugar you stir; it is in the sinews of the famous British "sweet tooth"; it is in the tea leaves at the bottom of the next "British" cuppa' (p. 25).

As always, Hall's concern is the present, on 'home-grown racism', more than the imperial and colonial legacy. Indigenous racism 'at home' is different 'from the racism of the "high" colonial period. It is a racism "at home" not abroad; it is the racism, not of a dominant but of a declining social formation' (p. 26). Hence there are different racisms and not a singular racism. Hall locates this development in several changes – the influx of colonial migrants into labour-hungry British production, the rise of racist reaction seen in the 1958 riots, the 'structured antagonism' (p. 28) between blacks and whites where the politics of race and the politics of the inner city connect, and the end of the politics of consensus and centrism under profound political changes in the 1960s. This is the context for the construction of what he calls here 'popular authoritarianism' (p. 31), and the recourse to law and order as core to the crisis is developed fully in Hall et al. (1978), as well as a public lecture (Hall, 1980a).

Hall's analysis of the present is always historicised, but links together economic, political and cultural forces and changes, and the role of ideology – in this case Powellism, understood as more than the words of an individual but rather the 'formation of an "official" racist policy at the heart of British political culture' (pp. 29–30). Powell, Hall says, speaks the 'language of an authentic regressive national populism' (p. 32), but Hall never treats ideas or ideology as autonomous from social forces and, as in the 1967 pamphlet, he stresses that ideology has 'real authentic material conditions at its roots' (p. 35). As seen in his work on the media and popular culture too, ideas are always refracted through material forces as well as 'elite news media, literary culture and mass culture, adapting and becoming part of [what he later called] "common sense"' (Finlayson, 2019, p. 229). For Hall race is or becomes 'the prism through which the British people are called upon to live through, then to understand, and then to deal with the growing crisis' (p. 30). Importantly, this 'is not a crisis of race. But race punctuates and periodises the crisis. . . . It is the framework through which the crisis is experienced' (p. 31). Racism is what connects the crisis of the state with the crisis on the streets. In this regard, we can see both the specific and wider senses in which Hall is applying the lessons he later (Hall, 1986) summarised as Gramscian, adopting a non-reductive approach to the relation of race and class; a non-homogeneous view of the nature of classed subjects; and a non-correspondence of the economic, political and ideological.

### *Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain (FMEB)*

The third example is a collectively authored document where Hall's signature is harder to pin down, the 2000 report of a Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain (FMEB). This panel of inquiry was sponsored by the Runnymede Trust and chaired by the political theorist Bhikhu Parekh; while the whole document is the work of a committee there is reason to believe that Hall drafted at least a section of the report – the vision statement of the inquiry (there is a telling mention of 'the humble cuppa' in para 2.7, p. 16). As a multi-authored, most recent and best known of the three sources I discuss this one more briefly.

At this stage towards the end of the century, Britain's political culture and make-up has become relatively diverse, with settled migrant populations and ordinary rather than exceptional multiculturalism. Yet as with the 1960s and 1970s it is also an unsettled and paradoxical period. Since the 1980s the UK mass media was central to a 'white backlash' against multiculturalism (Gabriel, 1998). At the same time this is the moment of the Stephen Lawrence report (Macpherson, 1999) and an acceptance by the UK government that institutional racism is an issue across society. In a 1999 article Hall stressed the contradictory character of multiculturalism, noting how Britain had never come to terms with the consequences of the arrival of West Indian migrants on the Windrush. The failures of what was supposedly the birth of a multicultural Britain are marked by racial violence and antagonism then and now. He observes an English nationalism that is unsettled and 'beleaguered' in what is a pre-echo of Gilroy's (2005) postcolonial melancholia, and the FMEB report is both a moment to reckon with that past as well as to move beyond it.

The report is conceived and set within a context of profound changes in Britain, including the impact of globalisation, the end of Empire, internal devolution to the nations of the UK, Britain's relationship with Europe, as well as its economic decline as a world power. Parekh (2000) notes that empire once gave Britain a common identity across its national and regional differences, as well as across class lines. These changes underscore the committee's call for a reckoning with Britain's colonial history: specifically, they called for a post-national conception of Britain at the start of a new millennium. For the Commission this entails rethinking what the national story is and asserting that Britain has never 'been the unified, conflict-free land of popular imagination', and there is no simple white majority. This then entails de-homogenising or disaggregating both the idea of Britain itself, as well as seeing ethnic minorities as diverse, culturally and geographically. These reflect the new ethnicities that Hall (1991) had written about, as well as his Gramscian concern with understanding the nation and its regional unevenness.

Race and class provide a consistent connecting thread across the three public engagements. In 1967 Hall was highlighting race or colour as an issue among and within working-class communities. Then, as in the 1970s and at the turn of the century (and now) race/migration is not the crisis but it regularly functions as a lens through which the crisis of the nation is lived. FMEB tried to offer a new or changed national narrative to respond to that. In his later reflection on it, Hall again draws out the non-correspondence of the economic and the social, with race cutting across both: 'what has changed is, you go into the street – and I came here in 1951 – and it just looks

different. Britain will never go back to being a culturally homogenous society ever again. It can't. I mean it can have purges, it can throw people out into the sea, it can enforce assimilation but it can't go back to being stable and steady on its own mono-cultural foundations. It can't happen' (Hall & Back, 2009, pp. 679–680).

## Conclusion

In seeking to understand Stuart Hall as an interventionist sociologist this article itself attempts to make several interventions. Hall was undeniably both public and an intellectual, but just saying he was a public intellectual is vague, and the main forms or types of that do not easily fit him. While there is no doubt of his critical and engaged 'publicness', the argument made here is that employing the interventionist lens helps us to see his method more productively, and read the content of what he said, particularly in his public engagements. In this light, Hall appears as intervening *as* a sociologist and also *in* sociology. This article offers a specific insight into this: Hall's multiple and expansive engagements across academic and policy fields are of a distinct kind – informed by reflexivity about his own positionality, attention to the concrete, a radical contextualising or conjunctural frame and, always, a deep engagement with the politics of race and nation, in its narrow and global forms. Indeed, Turner (2006) recognises him as one of the immigrants to the UK (and also to sociology) who give British sociology its distinct character. But unlike the others Turner refers to, I suggest that Hall's signature contribution was the interventionist sociology he developed, as an endeavour that takes the concrete and specific and assembles tools from social theory to develop a critical, historicised analysis.

The particular thread in this article has been on Hall's interventions on race and racism, and the reason for that focus is linked both to his biography, and his ambiguous reception or place in the sociology of racism, in spite of his many influential contributions (e.g. Hall, 1980b, 1991, 1994). While I located Hall in relation to Gramsci to read the three public engagements, it is important to recognise that in many ways in that 1986 article he was synthesising, meshing and applying the analyses of racism he had already been using in the 1967 and 1978 texts; this reveals that there is a crossover from his academic and public works, which do not proceed from one to the other in a linear manner. In the CRC pamphlet and the BSA talk Hall (1967, 1978) always historicises his sociological scrutiny of race but in ways that are specific to the concrete moment, highlighting the mobilising power of racism, in relation to populism, nationalism and the state, to understand 'the specific forms which racism assumes in its ideological functioning' (Hall, 1980b, p. 341). While much of what Hall does is obviously a kind of critical sociology, his interventions are more than 'just' critique, something that is clear in his commentaries on major reports on race and policing (e.g. see Hall, 1982, 1999), as well as in other engagements. His input is often suggestively framed and can be read as seeking or offering solutions and ideas, in other words as scholarly public engagement that has some 'policy' implications. Thus, in both the 1960s and 1970s he appeals for more understanding of how race and racism frame public debates, of the interconnections of race and class, and implies how things could be otherwise. This reaches its apogee in FMEB where the call for a revived settlement of British identity underscores a route to a more peaceful and forward-looking nation. In pointing to (an)other politics and other

possibilities, this picture of Hall as an interventionist offers a distinct way of thinking about sociological public engagements.

### Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to the two journal reviewers, as well as to the editor Paul Jones, for their detailed comments and recommendations that helped me to improve this article.

### Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Notes

1. Many tributes are collected at this website: [www.stuarthallfoundation.org/stuart-hall/tributes/](http://www.stuarthallfoundation.org/stuart-hall/tributes/)
2. The Gilroy and Gilmore (2021) collection of Hall's works on race omits the Racism and reaction essay (Hall, 1978) that I discuss here, although it is in another book in the series from Duke University Press.
3. In another article I make the case for Hall's interventions in criminology in terms of intellectual activism (Murji, 2020).
4. I thank one of the reviewers for reminding me of this source.
5. See also Tony Jefferson's review of Familiar Stranger (Hall, 2017a) in *Theory, Culture & Society*, 34(7–8), 305–313.
6. This is complied by and available from the Stuart Hall Foundation, see the website in note 1.
7. Farred says this followed his seeing the 2013 film *The Stuart Hall Project*, [www2.bfi.org.uk/blu-rays-dvds/stuart-hall-project](http://www2.bfi.org.uk/blu-rays-dvds/stuart-hall-project)
8. For Barrett (1998, p. 271) the connection between them is so close as to be expressible 'in the manner of musical notation, as "Antonio Gramsci [*arr.* S.Hall]"

### References

- Alexander, C. (2009). Stuart Hall and 'race'. *Cultural Studies*, 23(4), 457–482.
- Anderson, P. (2017). *The H-word: The peripeteia of hegemony*. Verso.
- Back, L., & Tate, M. (2015). For a sociological reconstruction: W.E.B. Du Bois, Stuart Hall and segregated sociology, *Sociological Research Online*, 20(3), 15. [www.socresonline.org.uk/20/3/15.html](http://www.socresonline.org.uk/20/3/15.html)
- Baert, P. (2015). *The existentialist moment: The rise of Sartre as a public intellectual*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Barrett, M. (1998). Stuart Hall. In R. Stones (Ed.), *Key sociological thinkers* (pp. 266–278). Palgrave.
- Brennan, T. (2021). *Places of mind: A life of Edward Said*. Bloomsbury.
- Brown, A. R. (2018). *Political languages of race and the politics of exclusion*. Routledge.
- Burawoy, M. (2005). For public sociology. *American Sociological Review*, 70(1), 4–28.
- Carrington, B. (2019). Remembering Stuart Hall: Learning to think differently. *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics*, 96(1), 248–254.
- Clarke, J. (2014). Conjunctures, crises, and cultures: Valuing Stuart Hall. *Focaal*, 70, 113–122.
- Clarke, J. (2015). Stuart Hall and the theory and practice of articulation. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 36(2), 275–286.
- Davidson, A. (2008). The uses and abuses of Gramsci. *Thesis Eleven*, 95(1), 68–94.

- Eyal, G., & Buchholz, L. (2010). From the sociology of intellectuals to the sociology of interventions. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 36, 117–137.
- Farred, G. (1997). *What's my name? Black vernacular intellectuals*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Farred, G. (2016). To be and not to be. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 115(4), 651–664.
- Fatsis, L. (2018). Becoming public characters, not public intellectuals: Notes towards an alternative conception of public intellectual life. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 21(3), 267–287.
- Finlayson, A. (2019). Consciousness and commitment in the political conjuncture. *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics*, 96(1), 229–232.
- Foucault, M. (1977). The political function of the intellectual. *Radical Philosophy*, 17.
- Gabriel, J. (1998). *Whitewash: Racialized politics and the media*. Routledge.
- Gilroy, P. (2005). *Postcolonial melancholia*. Columbia University Press.
- Gilroy, P. (2021). Race is the prism. In P. Gilroy & R. W. Gilmore (Eds.), *Stuart Hall: Selected writings on race and difference* (pp. 1–11). Duke University Press.
- Gilroy, P., & Gilmore, R. W. (Eds.). (2021). *Stuart Hall: Selected writings on race and difference*. Duke University Press.
- Grossberg, L. (2007). Stuart Hall on race and racism: Cultural studies and the practice of contextualism. In B. Meeks (Ed.), *Culture, politics, race and diaspora: The thought of Stuart Hall* (pp. 99–119). Lawrence & Wishart.
- Hall, S. (1967). *The young Englishmen*. National Committee of Commonwealth Immigrants.
- Hall, S. (1977). The hinterland of science: Ideology and the ‘sociology of knowledge’. *Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, 10, 9–32.
- Hall, S. (1978). Racism and reaction. In *Five views of multi-racial Britain* (pp. 23–35). Commission for Racial Equality.
- Hall, S. (1980a). *Drifting into a law and order society*. Cobden Trust.
- Hall, S. (1980b). Race, articulation, and societies structured in dominance. *Sociological theories: Race and colonialism* (pp. 305–345). UNESCO.
- Hall, S. (1982). The lessons of Lord Scarman. *Critical Social Policy*, 2(5), 66–72.
- Hall, S. (1986). Gramsci’s relevance for the study of race and ethnicity. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 10(2), 5–27.
- Hall, S. (1991). Old and new identities, old and new ethnicities. In A. D. King (Ed.), *Culture globalization and the world system* (pp. 41–68). Macmillan.
- Hall, S. (1994). Cultural identity and diaspora. In J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity: Community, culture, difference* (pp. 222–237). Lawrence & Wishart.
- Hall, S. (1996). Cultural studies and its theoretical legacies. In D. Morley & K. H. Chen (Eds.), *Stuart Hall: Critical dialogues in cultural studies* (pp. 262–275). Routledge.
- Hall, S. (1997). The spectacle of the other. In S. Hall (Ed.), *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices* (pp. 223–290). Sage.
- Hall, S. (1999). From Scarman to Stephen Lawrence. *History Workshop Journal*, 48, 187–197.
- Hall, S. (2007). Through the prism of an intellectual life. In B. Meeks (Ed.), *Culture, politics, race and diaspora: The thought of Stuart Hall* (pp. 269–291). Lawrence & Wishart.
- Hall, S. (2017a). *Familiar stranger: A life between two islands*. Duke University Press.
- Hall, S. (2017b). *The fateful triangle: Race, ethnicity, nation*. Harvard University Press.
- Hall, S., & Back, L. (2009). At home and not at home: Stuart Hall in conversation with Les Back. *Cultural Studies*, 23(4), 658–687.
- Hall, S., Critcher, C., Jefferson, T., Clarke, J., & Roberts, B. (1978). *Policing the crisis: Mugging, the state and law and order*. Macmillan (revised edition 2013).
- Jacques, M. (2017). Always an outsider: That is why he had such a unique insight. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 18(2), 172–174.



- Kurzman, C., & Owens, L. (2002). The sociology of intellectuals. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 28(1), 63–90.
- Macpherson, W. (1999). *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry*. TSO.
- Mullan, B. (1987). *Sociologists on sociology*. Croom Helm.
- Murji, K. (2020). Stuart Hall as a criminological theorist-activist. *Theoretical Criminology*, 24(3), 447–460.
- Parekh, B. (2000). *The future of multi-ethnic Britain*. Profile Books.
- Rich, P. (1986). *Race and empire in British politics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Said, E. (1994). *Representations of the intellectual* [The Reith Lectures, BBC].
- Slack, J. D. (1996). The theory and method of articulation in cultural studies. In D. Morley & K. H. Chen (Eds.), *Stuart Hall: Critical dialogues in cultural studies* (pp. 113–130). Routledge.
- Solomos, J. (2014). Stuart Hall: Articulations of race, class and identity. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 37(10), 1667–1675.
- Turner, B. S. (2006). British sociology and public intellectuals: Consumer society and imperial decline. *British Journal of Sociology*, 57(2), 169–188.
- Winter, R. (2018). The nonconformist practices of Stuart Hall: Cultural studies and the politics of emancipation. *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, 18(5), 366–373.