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I Persevered with my Geography

David Bell, University of Leeds

Abstract: In this personal reflection, I trace some of the interconnections between Stuart Hall's work and the 'new' cultural geography. In the context of my own intellectual biography, and indebted to Hall and those geographers whose work has been influenced by him, I am interested in 'routes' rather than 'roots', and in the traffic between cultural studies and 'critical' human geography. Drawing on a selection of Hall's work and a number of published interviews, I reflect on several moments of traffic and interchange. My discussion is partial and personal, rather than systematic: I track back and forth across a particular period when cultural studies exerted a significant influence on the discipline of geography, perhaps most notably in the UK. Beginning and ending in the current conjuncture, and taking in various stopping-off points along the way, I reflect on the legacy of this traffic in ideas.

Key words: cultural studies / cultural geography / place / politics

It's the day before the 2015 UK general election, and I'm reading (for the first time, I'm embarrassed to admit) 'Common-sense neoliberalism' (Hall and O'Shea 2013). It's unbelievably good. I'm immediately thinking of the best place to get it onto the curriculum I'm currently helping to teach. I'm thinking that maybe the economic geography course could really use it. Or maybe as a tutorial reading, to help critique the various forms of 'common-sense' that sometimes pervade our classroom discussions.

'Common-sense neoliberalism' is part of a collection of essays gathered under the title *The Kilburn Manifesto*, associated with the journal *Soundings* that Hall was an editor of for a number of years. These essays provide a number of different perspectives on and responses to neoliberalism. Hall and O'Shea contribute a brilliant and nuanced discussion of how 'common sense' works and of the work that 'common sense' does. It returns our attention to Gramsci, and draws on diverse sources – including comments from UK tabloid *The Sun's* online blog. It is sharply political – and feels especially so at the time I'm reading it.

It also mentions space and place – not least in noting that 'common sense' is expressed in vernacular spaces: 'the familiar language of the street, the home, the pub, the workplace and the terraces' (and, we might add, given their work with *Sun* readers' online comments, of the Internet) (Hall & O'Shea 2013: 9). While these geographies of 'common sense' are not a central concern of the analysis, it's not uncommon to see location, place, home, space, globalization and a whole host of geographical concepts nested within Hall's work. And vice versa – Hall's thinking has long been a key influence in some parts of human geography, notably those once labelled the 'new' cultural

geography. (I think we've been here long enough to drop the 'new' now.) That productive interaction will be a key focus of my discussion here.

I also want to weave my own story into this discussion, as someone who has moved from geography to cultural studies, and back again. For some 30 years, I have at various times turned to Hall's work to think with, to teach with and to learn with. My move into cultural studies (or at least formally into it, as my institutional home) in 1995 was during the period of the expansion of cultural studies (and its close relation, media studies) in UK universities, as well as during the 'cultural turn' (and its poor relation, the 'spatial turn'). Hall has himself reflected on the 'arc' of cultural studies in the UK, perhaps most candidly in interviews or conference talks (some of which I turn to here), and I shall also be reflecting on that 'arc' and its intersections with my own path through work and life. And I want to say from the outset that all of us engaged in the project of understanding culture, wherever we find our institutional home, owe a tremendous debt to Stuart Hall. In this essay I am both revisiting some of his work that I am already familiar with, and also catching up – his output is so vast that there are things I missed first time round that it is great to have the excuse to take time to read; things like 'Common-sense neoliberalism'.

Trade Winds and Cups of Tea

The title of my essay comes from an interview with Stuart Hall by Colin MacCabe (2008). It's an anecdote I have seen in a couple of places, so it was clearly a favourite of Hall's. He is reminiscing about being a schoolteacher in the late 1950s, where he found himself teaching everything from English literature to mathematics and swimming. And even geography:

I taught geography. I remember a point at which the geography master came in and pointed out gently to me that my diagram on the board managed to reverse the north-east and south-west trades. But still I persevered with my geography (MacCabe and Hall 2008)

This resonates with me in so many ways! Like Hall, I found myself teaching geography (though in a polytechnic, in the late 1980s), and I was permanently paranoid about making a geographical *faux pas*, the equivalent of reversing the trade winds. But like Hall, I persevered with my geography. There's a temptation to read this 'reversal' as mischievous – as, perhaps, a way to draw attention to the 'common sense' that links winds to trade, and thus to the whole business of mercantilism and colonialism. What if the trade winds were reversed? It reminds me of Uruguayan artist Joaquin Torres Garcia's map of South America, drawn 'upside down', with the caption 'our north is the South'. As Torres Garcia explains:

Our north is the South. There should be no north for us, except in opposition to our South. That is why we now turn the map upside down, and now we know what our true position is, and it is not the way the rest of the world would like to have it. From now on, the elongated tip of South America will point insistently at the South, our North. Our compass as well; it will incline irremediably and forever towards the South, towards our pole. When ships sail from here traveling north, they will be traveling down, not up as before. Because the North is now below. And as we face our South, the East is to our left. This is a necessary rectification; so that now we know where we are (quoted in Rommens 2006: n.p.).

Hall never comments (as far as I have seen) on this reversal of his own map, and seems to use it mainly to humorously evidence his own incompetence as a geography teacher. But it is too tempting to read it as some form of 'necessary rectification', or at least a drawing of attention towards what we geographers like to call the power of maps. Now we know where we are.

Of course, that's one of Hall's famous strategies: to take something obvious, well known, unremarkable and unremarked-on, and by drawing our attention to all that it contains, all it reveals and conceals, to get us to see differently. The most famous example is of course the cup of sweet tea. Although it is so well known many of us can recite it pretty much word for word, here it is:

People like me who came to England in the 1950s have been there for centuries; symbolically, we have been there for centuries. I was coming home. I am the sugar at the bottom of the English cup of tea. I am the sweet tooth, the sugar plantations that rotted generations of English children's teeth. There are thousands of others beside me that are, you know, the cup of tea itself. Because they don't grow it in Lancashire, you know. Not a single tea plantation exists within the United Kingdom. This is the symbolization of English identity – I mean, what does anybody in the world know about an English person except that they can't get through the day without a cup of tea? Where does it come from? Ceylon - Sri Lanka, India. That is the outside history that is inside the history of the English (Hall 1991: 48-49).

As Les Back writes, after this 'it was impossible to ever drink a cup of tea again without being reminded of the imperial traces in the brown leaves and the sugar's sweet taste' (Back & Figueroa 2014: 353). And it's true – this drawing-attention stays in your mind. There are many other instances dotted throughout Hall's work, where he makes us pause for thought. There's similar mischief in this quote – imagining tea plantations in Lancashire, the sugar rotting children's teeth – as there is in the mis-drawn trade winds. And so we all persevere with our geography, enlivened by Hall's sideways approach to the subject.[1] Let's spend some time looking more explicitly at the interactions between Hall and his disciplinary home, cultural studies, and geography.

Cultural Geography and its Legacies

Back in 1992, Hall considered cultural studies and its theoretical legacies; this phrase, he writes, 'suggests a look back to the past, to consult and think about the Now and the Future of cultural studies by way of a retrospective glance. It does seem necessary to do some genealogical and archaeological work on the archive' (Hall 1992: 277). Here he acknowledges that his version of the story of cultural studies is only one of many, is partial and particular, biographical. The way we tell and retell stories about disciplinary formations (and about everything else), of course, plays more than an archival role: it constitutes disciplinary identity (Hemmings 2011). And all stories are contested, subject to revision and retrospective editing. Let me tell you one such story (see Bell 2009 for a different telling. See what I mean about stories?).

Once upon a time, there used to be something called cultural geography, built from the work of great men such as Carl Sauer or Vidal de la Blanche, concerned with mapping where distinctive cultures existed, and understanding why, largely through a deterministic lens – a lens focused on the 'cultural landscape'. In the 1980s, when I came into human geography as a polytechnic lecturer (I'd previously mainly been studying physical geography and geology, but that's another story), this version of cultural geography was relatively quiet, dormant even. Largely unknown to me as a very junior member of the discipline, there was a revolution going on, a paradigm shift. I gradually became aware of this shift through the courses I was asked to teach, and the hours spent wandering the library shelves, reading the periodicals, cramming my geographical knowledge so as to avoid those *faux pas*, trying not to reverse the trade winds. A year into my new job, Peter Jackson's *Maps of Meaning* (1989) was published. This was utterly unlike the cultural geography I was now dimly aware of, and pretty uninterested in. It had a Christo 'wrapped buildings' picture on the cover. It's Foreword, by Derek Gregory, began by telling us readers that 'The intellectual scene is changing fast' and that 'concepts of place, space and landscape have become central to some of the most exciting developments across the whole field of the humanities and social sciences' (Gregory 1989: vii). This was an exhilarating message, to be sure. It felt like a great time to be a geographer.

Jackson's book introduced us to this 'new' cultural geography, and to cultural studies. It has been rightly hailed as a 'classic' in human geography in at least one of our journals (Jackson 2005). Reflecting on the book's life and on its 'classic' status, Jackson explains that his mission in writing it was to 'recognize the significance of what was happening in Cultural Studies and to translate this material for a geographical audience' (Jackson 2005: 746). This is a bit modest, but also an interesting way of framing the book – as a 'translation' of Cultural Studies. I wonder what got lost in translation? Why did Cultural Studies need translating for us geographers? Anyway, one of the people that Jackson introduced us to was, of course, Stuart Hall. For this is a book about a certain formation of cultural studies, and the CCCS is a heavy presence (see also Cosgrove & Jackson 1987 for a map of 'new directions' in cultural geography). Hall's work is often turned to by Jackson, and I was certainly turned (and turned on) to the CCCS approach, taken from *Maps of Meaning* to *Resistance through Rituals* and *Policing the Crisis*. And then down the rabbit hole of cultural studies...

Jackson notes in his later reflections on *Maps of Meaning* that there was two-way traffic between cultural studies and geography at this heady time: our 'cultural turn' coincided with a 'spatial turn' across the humanities and social sciences – as Derek Gregory alluded to in his Foreword. And coming towards us like a speeding train was also postmodernism. For some, the 'excesses' of postmodernism swallowed up the discipline, while the ascendancy of the cultural led geography away from important issues such as politics, economics, injustice. I find this collapsing of different agendas and effects troubling, and feel the need to 'rescue' the 'new' cultural geography from being thrown out with the bathwater of the postmodern. (Actually, I feel a bit nostalgic for the postmodern, too.)

I have chosen two moments of this 'two-way traffic' to explore here. The first is a short piece by Doreen Massey, a frequent collaborator and close friend of Hall. In one of a number of collections made in his honour, Massey (2000) describes driving from London to Milton Keynes with Hall – both were at the time working at the Open University. I read this article just this week, and it fired off intertextual connections in my mind to two recent BBC TV comedies, *The Trip* and *Car Share*. In both, the main characters spend lots of time confined together driving and passengering in a car, and much of the comedy comes from their conversations on the road. So I imagine Doreen and Stuart bickering, doing impressions, singing along to the radio – though Massey only admits to them arguing with Melvyn Bragg (a relatively high-brow Radio 4 presenter). Massey also uses the journey to think about space-time, and to mull over a key theme in Hall's work – home, and going home. Even when explored through their mundane M1 trips, she acknowledges that 'going home is not at all going back to the same place' (Massey 2000: 227) – home is moving on all the time, not frozen in patient wait for our return. 'You can't go back', she later adds, because that sense of place as an 'enduring site' is a fiction (p. 230). People change, and so do places.

Massey also explored this theme in a conference presentation at Cultural Studies Now.[2] Here she notes that it's difficult to draw a line to separate the disciplines of geography and cultural studies (which was for some people part of the problem, at least for geography – suddenly it had all gone cultural; see Barnett 1998). Massey says that geography and cultural studies have been good neighbours[3] and that geography has learnt from its neighbour how to think about identity, including the identity of place:

We've learnt a lot from our conversations. One of the crucial political engagements with Cultural Studies, for me as a geographer, has been ... about the question of identity. But here, what was at issue was the identity of geographical things; national identity, the identity of places, the question of the relation between the global and the local (Massey 2007 n.p.)

And, we might add, the question of home. For the issue of home – of being ‘at home and not at home’, to borrow the title from another interview (Hall & Back 2009) – has long been central to Hall’s work, and this attention to home has certainly made the concept central to geography (Blunt & Dowling 2006). As Massey indicates, cultural studies has led geographers to rethink places as ‘as articulations of wider practices, relations and flows’ (2007 n.p.) and also as a question of identity. I will be saying more about Hall’s theorizing of identity later.

In terms of the two-way-ness of this conversation – and this is my second moment -- Michael Keith (2009) has explored how the urban figures in Hall’s work, beginning with *Policing the Crisis* and the notion of ‘ghetto urbanism’, moving through ‘New Ethnicities’ and spatial metaphors of location, grounding and placing, and on to ‘The Multicultural Question’ and its ‘cartography of the present’ and multi-scalar approach, taking in the local, national and global (Keith 2009: 548). Across this 20-plus year period in Hall’s work, Keith charts a changing role for the city such that, by the end of this trajectory, the spatial has become ‘a constitutive feature of theorization’ (p. 540). Indeed, this interplay of the spatial with the cultural did mean that the gap between the disciplines closed up, as Massey notes – or closed enough for a geographer like me to jump across, and join a cultural studies department.

Cultural geography, meanwhile, continued to grow and diversify, for a while (in the UK at least) seeming like the dominant way of doing (human) geography. It even had a few ‘turns’ of its own – an emotional turn, a performative turn, a material turn. It starts to feel a bit like plate spinning – all that turning, all at once. In 2010 the *journal cultural geographies* published a number of essays looking backwards and forwards, taking stock of cultural geography, including those that redressed the story I have told above about how cultural geography ‘translated’ cultural studies, and became ‘new’. Summing up his thoughts on what was, what is and what will be, Phil Crang (2010: 197) ends with an upbeat prognosis: ‘Cultural Geography is particularly vibrant at present, energized by a returning tension, namely how to stitch together a dual concern with the mundane and trivial and with the remarkable and significant. Today’s Cultural Geography is, in my view, at its best characterized by powerful senses of texture, creativity and public engagement’. It’s that last powerful sense that I want to think about later in this essay.

Stuart Hall Projects

I am using the word ‘projects’ both as a noun and a verb here – to highlight both the many intellectual and political projects that Hall has been involved with, and in the sense of his work projecting into our own work and lives. It is, of course, also a nod to John Akomfrah’s 2013 film, *The Stuart Hall Project*. The first project (and projection) I would like to think about here is what we might call *the project of identity*. Of course, Hall’s work has always been about identity, often about his own identity. But in a series of essays from the mid/late 1980s, he centrally concerned himself with the *question* of identity. By the time I landed in cultural studies in 1995, this was the Stuart Hall we were mainly talking and thinking about.

As I noted earlier, writing this essay has given me a chance to reacquaint myself with some of Hall's writings, and I have particularly enjoyed going back to a small piece called 'Minimal Selves' (Hall 1987). I've always especially liked its title, and its tone. It's an intervention from an event at the ICA in London, called 'The Real Me', which was for lots of us in cultural studies an important text on the question of identity – that phrase inviting the obvious question: *just who is the real me?*

Hall's paper is a response to that event, and its context – what we might call the postmodernizing of identity, its decentring and fragmentation. The idea of identity as a 'necessary fiction' (and how well I remember an essay we used to set on this very issue). 'Minimal Selves' involves generous observations of the present moment – as he addresses the audience, noting 'in the postmodern age, you all feel so dispersed', adding that 'I become centred', meaning that the dispersed experience of the migrant, as he terms it here, has been taken as the paradigmatic postmodern subject position. 'This is 'coming home' with a vengeance', he concludes (more of that characteristic mischief). The essay/talk continues with some thoughts about home, about the 'arbitrary closures' of identity, about 'living with, living through difference' (p. 45). But Hall insists on keeping the political at its heart – including but not limited to the politics of identity -- refusing to see 'minimal selves' as atomised and individuated.[4]

So one central Stuart Hall project is the project of identity, and here we might include the project (or perhaps problem) of the 'cultural' in both cultural studies and cultural geography. This question, of what counts as the cultural, is beyond my reach here, but within the story of cultural geography it has been a continued focus, with both expansive and more tightly defined variants. While some geographers threw their hands in the air in the mid-1990s, bemoaning that now 'everything was cultural', others more patiently questioned what putting cultural and geography together really means, and achieves.

One of the pleasures of re-reading 'Minimal Selves' was to see the actual text again, like a forgotten old friend, to hold it in my hands (albeit in a crumpled, scribbled on photocopy). This made me reflect on other 'old friends' from my collection of Hall's work – though I have just moved into a new office at work, and am struggling to find lots of my books in the chaos of hurried packing/unpacking. So, casting about in my memory, rather than on my bookshelves, I am particularly reminded of three series of texts. The first was the time when, doing my PhD in Birmingham (but in a geography department seemingly untouched by its neighbour the CCCS), I happened upon the famous Stencilled Paper Series in the university library. These dog-eared, decidedly DIY, even punk-ish papers – more like fanzines than scholarly articles, bashed out on manual typewriters and run off on low-tech copiers – gave me quite a thrill.[6] Finding them in such a stuffy campus environment made me feel that a different kind of academic work was possible, even here.

The second came when I was landed with a first-year cultural studies course to teach on modernity and postmodernity. Its core texts were the Open University's 4-part 'Understanding Modern Societies' series, which included two Hall essays – 'The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power' in *Formations of Modernity* (Hall & Gieben 1992) and 'The Question of Cultural Identity' in *Modernity and its Futures* (Hall, Held & McGrew 1992). These books were also a revelation, and really great to teach with. Third, and also an OU series (Culture, Media and Identities), were the edited books *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (Hall 1997) and especially helpful for me, as I was now teaching courses on technology and culture and on consumption, *Doing Cultural Studies: the Story of the Sony Walkman* (du Gay et al 1997). What I particular love about all these OU books is their user-friendliness, for teachers and for students. They handle often really difficult ideas, but with a lightness of touch and a really engaging tone that carries the reader along. I think I learnt a lot from these books, not just about their topics, but about how to teach and how to write. And from the Stencilled Papers I learnt that academic work could engage with the popular, but that it works best when it does this with a strong political engagement. As Hall himself said, cultural studies must be 'haunted' by the important question: 'But what does this have to do with everything else?' (Hall 2007 n.p.).

Now, as noted, an important feature of those OU series was that they are *textbooks*. And, given the way the OU operates, textbooks that have to do a lot of work, to guide student readers through ideas, to exemplify, to ask questions and give examples. I've always thought that textbook-writing is an undervalued art. Like first year teaching, I think there's a real skill in distilling things without dumbing them down. Getting the voice right is very tricky, especially perhaps in cultural studies. Even more impressive, these are edited collections – another undervalued form in academic work. But getting different authors to produce something coherent yet polyvocal, seems a doubly taxing task. (I was working with Christine Gledhill at this time, who contributed to *Representation* – I wish I'd talked more with her about the actual experience of working on these books). For those of us working at the chalk-face in cultural studies and cultural geography in the 1990s, these books were both a tremendous help and a fantastic guide – we were, as Hall (1992: 281) says, 'learning to practice cultural studies', and these books showed us how to get the voice right, too. I would later return to both series; the first, highlighted in a sketch of Hall's work in a lecture on the impact of 'non-geographers' on contemporary geographical thought (alongside Foucault and Haraway), the second in a course on media geographies, where the Walkman reappeared in a discussion of mobile media.

Now, it's well known that Stuart Hall also had a prominent public profile and media presence – or at least as prominent as academics seem to be able to get in the UK. As *The Stuart Hall Project* shows, he made fairly frequent appearances on television, whether fronting Open University programmes or sitting on panels, often screened late at night, discussing current affairs. And of course, he once appeared on BBC Radio 4's *Desert Island Discs*, where for 45 minutes the guest tells their life story via ten pieces of music – music that they might imagine being some sort of comfort (or reminder of home?) if they found themselves stranded on a desert island.[5]. Hall's role as a public intellectual is rightly celebrated; indeed, as Henry Giroux (2000: 342) writes, all of Hall's work is 'crucial for

understanding pedagogy as a mode of cultural criticism that is essential for questioning the conditions under which knowledge is produced and subject positions are put into place, negotiated, taken up, or refused'. And I really like Giroux's summing up of the character of Hall's work: 'it is accessible but refuses easy answers' (p. 356). Even on *Desert Island Discs*, he sneaks in some sophisticated analysis, woven into autobiography and interspersed with Bob Marley, Puccini, and Miles Davis.

Refusing Easy Answers

It's now two days *after* the general election – an election that has seen the Conservative government returned to power with an absolute majority. A question from Hall's 'The Neo-liberal Revolution' has been ringing in my ears since Friday morning: 'how do we make sense of our extraordinary political situation in Britain?' (Hall 2011: 705). How indeed. Talking with my students only depresses me more – sometimes they seem to speak the words of 'common-sense neoliberalism'. As Massey notes, depressingly about neoliberalism, 'there are many who love this new way of being, and not just the very rich', to which she adds that 'we must understand its attractions and its purchase if we are to engage with it' (Massey 2014: 2038). But I struggle, though I'm now doubly certain we must get the students to read Hall and O'Shea's critique. Their opening discussion of how politicians mobilise 'common sense' rings ever truer in the wake of weeks of campaigning, endless soundbites and photo opportunities, a few stage-managed 'debates' and other media spectacles. Writing back in 2011, Hall could hope that there was 'as yet no overwhelming majority appetite for the neo-liberal project' (Hall 2011: 723). The outcome of the general election now suggests otherwise, at least in England. (He even speculates in that essay about a future Conservative majority.)

It seems to me that we need Stuart Hall more than ever; we need to keep working on his conjunctural analysis, need to keep working at the boundaries of theory and politics, need to keep unsettling common-sense neoliberalism. The present conjuncture requires our intervention, in and out of the classroom. No matter where we call our home – whatever island we find ourselves inhabiting – we must all continue learning to practice cultural studies, and persevere with our geography.

Notes

1. In work on food's geographies, there's an obvious lineage from Hall's cup of sweet tea to later studies that 'follow the thing' and trace the geographies of foodstuffs. See for example Cook et al 2004.
2. Cultural Studies Now was held at the University of East London in 2007; transcripts of many of the talks, including those by Hall and Massey, can be found here: http://culturalstudiesresearch.org/?page_id=12

3. And here I cannot help but be reminded that Hall was a big fan of the Australian soap opera *Neighbours*.

4. This period in Hall's work is marked by an intensifying theorization of identity – he later reflects critically on what he sees as his 'ventriloquising' of capital-T Theory, exclaiming at one point 'Poor Lacan', remembering what he sees as the rough handling that psychoanalysis sometimes got in this ventriloquism (Hall 2007).

5. Available on BBC iplayer at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0094b6r>

6. The Stencilled Paper Series is archived here:

<http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/historycultures/departments/history/research/projects/cccs/publications/stencilled-occasional-papers.aspx>

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