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Being Cold in England

Stuart Hall on the Psychic Life of Colonialism



Stuart Hall (with Bill Schwarz)
Familiar Stranger . A Life Between Two Islands

Großbritannien
London 2017: Allen Lane
320 S., EUR 25,69
ISBN 978-0-241-28999-0

When Stuart Hall was young, his older sister Pat fell in love. The man she loved was a respectable, upper middle-class student of medicine from the island of Trinidad – a good catch for an upper middle-class girl from Jamaica. There was only one problem: the colour of his skin. Hall's mother prided herself in the family's lighter skin, a sign of superior status and worth in the thoroughly colonised society of Jamaica. She viciously objected to the dark-skinned student, forcing her daughter to leave him. Pat Hall was plunged into a mental breakdown from which she never really recovered. As Hall observes, 'she was a prime example of the process by which a casualty of the whole colonial racialized system lives out, in the interior of the family and in the collapses of her mind, the trauma of a colonial culture, condensed into and expressed through the psychic intimacies and emotional intensities of the colonial family' (p. 59).

This story, which Stuart Hall recounts in his memoir, *Familiar Stranger: A Life Between Two Islands*, contains many of the currents this book investigates: the intermingling of race and class, the legacies of colonialism, the complex construction of identities and their consequences for the psychic life of the socialised 'individual'.

Hall, a social and cultural theorist well-known in Britain but not yet well enough in Germany, was born in 1932 in Kingston, Jamaica, then still a British crown colony. He moved to England in 1951, where he made a name for himself first as part of the New Left and founding editor of the *New Left Review*, and then as a leading figure of the Birmingham school of cultural studies. His seminal contributions, mostly contained in essays currently collected and republished by Duke University Press,¹ range from readings of popular culture and mass media to far-sighted analyses of Thatcherism and critiques of the colonial and racial structures resting deeply in the bones of both Western and non-Western societies.

Hall's memoirs, compiled and shaped to a succession of reflective essays by his long-time friend and collaborator Bill Schwarz,² can serve as an introduction to his thought in which one can observe Hall applying many of his ideas on the trajectory of his own life. This method is an instance of an interesting genre within the traditions of social science, in which a theorist 'uses' his or her own life as a starting point for an investigation into the social conditions of his or her lifetime, and thus provides insights into the social and historical conditions shaping the making of a specific body of social theory.³ The central theme of this first volume,⁴ which ends in the early 1960s, is colonialism. Hall's experiences as a colonised subject first in Jamaica, then in the heart of the imperial metropole – in Oxford and London – lead to his later sense, at the time of writing, of being the 'last colonial' in a post-colonial world still deeply defined by its colonial repercussions. To read Hall, and this memoir in particular, is to begin to understand the depth with which the colonial has shaped the modern world.

Colonialism had, of course, thoroughly shaped the colonial periphery in which Hall was born and brought up. Jamaican society, derived from a plantation economy in which the labour had been conducted by African slaves and their descendants, was a pigmentocracy in which class position and skin colour reinforced each other: the blacker, the poorer; the whiter, the better. Hall's family, especially his mother, held up their lighter skin colour as a sign of superiority before their servants and Kingston's black underclass. The chance of Stuart's darker colour – he was regarded as the family's 'coolie' – provided an early foundation for his estrangement from his family and the colonial hierarchies of Jamaica they – literally – embodied. This estrangement was strengthened by political events like the 1938 labour rebellions and the advent of Rastafarianism. It also found constant reasons for reproach in the sheer absurdity of cultural transplantation conducted by, among other things, the colonial education system with its simulacra of the metropole's habits – Hall describes how

"prefects struggled to make small boys keep their caps lodged somehow on the crown of their woolly heads, and laboured to keep their own caps white and free of the swirling dust. That these "habits and virtues" really belonged to other people, and could only be practised and instituted properly by them in a place very different from ours, was an unsolved puzzle, a nagging anxiety. To learn what they knew, did one have to become like them?" (p. 118)

All of this added to creating an intense feeling of dislocation with himself and his surroundings.⁵ This psychic side of colonialism, however, for Hall and many in his generation,

"was also productive because it bred a troubled refusal of, and resistance to, all the values it harboured in its bloodstream: servitude, poverty, patriarchalism, class inequality and racialized difference, of course, but also cultural colonization, all the petty humiliations of daily life." (p. 21)

But even in this struggle against his own colonial formations, 'one way or another, coming or going, positively or negatively – colonialism "got" me, made me, unacceptably, who I came to think I was' (p. 22).

This became equally clear after Hall relocated to England. In 1951, at the age of 18, he was awarded a Rhodes scholarship and made the passage to Oxford, where he studied English at Merton College. The experience of being in England

"was eerily familiar and disconcertingly strange at the same time. One can attribute this to the sense of déjà-vu which assails colonial travelers on first encountering face-to-face the imperial metropole, which they actually know only in its translated form through a colonial haze, but which has always functioned as their "constitutive outside": constituting them, or us, by its absence, because it is what they – we – are not." (p. 149)

As a migrant, Hall had to become a 'practical reader' of English culture and habits (p. 203), observing the English as someone living among them who could never entirely be part of their 'Englishness' – as he notes in passing, 'I have never really stopped being cold in England' (p. 8). This experience of leading life by 'conducting a permanent native ethnography' (p. 209) of Britain became one of the foundations of cultural studies, and, arguably, made possible the far-sighted analyses of Thatcherism and neoliberalism Hall

later laid out. Hall became a cultural theorist as a matter of practical necessity, as a strategy for survival.

From this ethnographic perspective, he observes English society, especially in relation to the reverberations and disavowals in its dealings with Empire and race. In Oxford tea houses, he listens to debates of the future ruling class, ‘with their braying pitch and stifled Oxford vowel sounds, addressing themselves to the world at large, as if what concerned them could not fail to be of breathtaking interest to the rest of the universe’ (p. 157). He witnesses how British society reacts to the first generation of postwar migrants from the Caribbean, the ‘Windrush’ generation – namely, with a racism depending on the selective forgetfulness and disavowals in its representations of Empire, compelling them to react to the migrants with an astonishing ignorance: Where do these people come from, they ask, and why, of all places, would they come *here*? As a teacher in London, meeting his pupils on the Tube by chance, he finds that they are on their way to join racist mobs harassing black migrants in Notting Hill. Under these circumstances, the best way of coming to terms with living in Britain as a black colonial turns out to be politics, which provides Hall with a way out from phantasies of ‘integration’ and assimilation: ‘I wanted to change British society, not adopt it.’ (p. 271)

Both the condition of the colonial and the condition of the diaspora compel him to think beyond the clear-cut binary difference systems of modernity – to think creolization and hybridity, the ‘third spaces’ of the between and beyond. They lead to a much more realistic understanding of ‘identity’, or, more precisely, ‘the chaos of identifications which we assemble in order to navigate the social world and also how we seek to reach, somehow, “ourselves”. Of course this arrival never occurs: we’ll never be ourselves, whatever that could mean. [...] Identity, in the singular, is never achieved with any finality. Identities, in the plural, are the means of becoming (p. 63). In his famous phrase, this marks a conception of identity, and of cultures, as being not about roots but about routes.

Through all of this, maybe the most compelling feature of this book is its attention for, and grounding in, the everyday, the popular, and the psychic life of the social. In this regard, Hall’s reflections fit well into contemporary social theory with its conceptualisations of the social as an outcome of everyday practices rather than as an assemblage of ‘structural’ macro aggregates. With Hall, however, the allegedly ‘small’ never operates in isolation. While contemporary social theory and research often fail to relate their findings from specific social interactions to a broader, systemic, analysis, Hall reminds us of the connections binding together these instances. But ‘colonialism’, for example, is not an

essentialised super structure, but a historical condition influencing but not determining the present, always the subject of contingent political change.

This insistence on the possibility of politics – on our capacity for collective action – is the best reason for us to read Stuart Hall today. Hall’s analysis insists on the importance of the past to explain the present conjuncture, while keeping the future – that is, history in the emphatic sense – open. In our current economic, cultural, and political crisis, we need precisely this: an analysis of how we got here that opens up paths for transforming the future.

Endnoten

1. Stuart Hall, *Selected Writings*, edited by Bill Schwarz and Catherine Hall, Durham 2016. Two volumes are already available: Stuart Hall, *Cultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History*, edited by Jennifer Daryl Slack, Lawrence Grossberg, Durham 2016; Stuart Hall, *Selected Political Writings: The Great Moving Right Show and Other Essays*, edited by Sally Davison, David Featherstone, Michael Rustin, Bill Schwarz, Durham 2017.
2. The manuscripts originated in taped conversations between Hall and Schwarz, which were then reworked by Hall multiple times. At the end of his life, he had decided to rework these manuscripts into a book, a work Schwarz finished posthumously for him. See Schwarz's preface, p. xiii–xvii.
3. Programmatic and maybe most radical in its rejection of the 'biographical illusion': Pierre Bourdieu, *Sketch for a Self-Analysis*, Cambridge, UK 2007.
4. A sequel, covering subsequent life periods, is still in the making (cf. Preface, p. xivf.).
5. See also Stuart Hall, Epilogue: Through the Prism of an Intellectual Life, in: Brian Meeks (ed.), *Culture, Politics, Race and Diaspora: The Thought of Stuart Hall*, London 2007, p. 269–291, h. p. 272–274.

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