

Living with difference

Stuart Hall in conversation with Bill Schwarz

In your article 'The Great Moving Right Show [Marxism Today January 1979], you told us that what Mrs Thatcher was going to achieve was not so much the victories of her own administration: she was going to set the tone of politics for future generations, whoever was in government. And you have been vindicated in that.

That's an interesting story because I think I came to understand the profundity of the change in political culture which Thatcherism represented, really, out of the work that we did at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies on race and mugging and crime, which was published in *Policing the Crisis* [Macmillan 1978]. This was an effort at understanding what was happening in Britain in the 1970s, and the prismatic function of race in all of that - race as a kind of recurring motif. It wasn't that the deepening political and social crisis of the 1970s was all about race, but somehow race and crime were at the very centre of what it was that Thatcherism could operate on to try to roll back the social democratic feelings which had been developing during the war and the post-war period, and this provided a sort of prism through which the whole conjuncture could be 'read' symptomatically. It was not just a question of the political victory of the new right. It was a profound change in political culture, marking the shift to a new historical conjuncture. And if the left didn't understand the depth at which this change was operating, it would be captured by it - it would be obliged to operate on territory which had not been defined by itself. And I think that is indeed what has happened.

What I have come to understand since then is that Thatcherism was not simply a British manifestation. It was the beginning of what we now call globalisation, the beginning of a new stage in the global capitalist economy: the revival of international capital after the period of the cold war and the welfare state. This could only happen if the new kind of market state - which is what is emerging today under

Living with difference

the auspices of New Labour - was linked to a profound transformation of social and cultural relations across the world. I now understand Thatcherism much more in terms of its geopolitical reverberations, as the beginning of a new political conjuncture. Neoliberalism is a new epoch in the world, replacing the epoch which came into existence at the end of the second world war; which - even if there was a Conservative government in power - was dominated by the perspective of social democracy. That is what has been entirely rolled away across the world. We are now in a completely different moment.

This new conjuncture, neoliberal globalisation, is an international phenomenon, and has involved the re-militarisation of relationships between the west and the rest.

Yes, globalisation has many aspects, including its strategic and military dimensions. However what I want to emphasise here is its contradictory nature. On the one hand it is a planetary project; it rolls across the boundaries of the nation state that have organised political and social life in the industrialised societies for the last two to three hundred years (though there have been previous eras of globalisation). It holds out the possibility of what we used to call internationalism (though, since it's no longer something which happens between nations, we can't use that term any longer). Potentially, this interdependence can be the source of a more pluri-centered world, the basis for the proliferation of difference.

On the other hand, globalisation provides the basis of the incorporation of all of planetary society within the forms of western life. In this sense it is an 'imperialising' project, a civilizational struggle, though its forms are different from these types of struggles in the past. And this is the tension: the proliferation of difference versus the 'Macdonaldisation' of the world, as some people call it - the imprinting of western forms of consumerism, western values, western ways of life, western liberal democracy, western capitalism, etc, across the face of the globe, on one society after another. Really to work in its dominant form, capitalist globalisation must try to draw everybody into its web, within its geopolitical sphere. It is a new phase of what Marx called the construction of the world market, which he saw as nearly complete but which in fact was only just beginning. Everyone must come to look a little bit like an American, or to love a little bit like an American, or to walk a little bit like an American. That's why television and the cultural industries are so critical, because

Soundings

you don't know quite how to walk and think in American until you look at enough television.

That is one side of the globalisation project. It is throwing people across boundaries, drawing cultures contradictorily together, sometimes of course in the most horrendous ways. People are displaced from their homes, forced across boundaries - living in transit camps, stowing away in the backs of lorries or underneath aeroplanes, putting themselves in lifelong debt to people traffickers in order to get somewhere else, to get out, to find a new life. This is globalisation too, the dark side, globalisation from below. In this aspect of globalisation, everything is free to move - investment, capital, images and messages: only labour must stay put. The great majority of people are not supposed to move, they are supposed to stay where they are and accept low wages, and become part of the world economy in that limited way. Otherwise how could the new international division of labour work? Instead of that, they get on a leaky boat and row towards the good life. Of course. What did we think they were going to do? You tell them that the good life is like that, and over there, and they're on their way. 'Economic migrants' are just people who want a better life. They are also people displaced by poverty, famine, disease and civil war. This is the other face - the underside, the underlife, of so-called global society.

And our politics now, in the new conjuncture, is the result of a tension between forces associated with these new possibilities, and the tremendous barbarities and dangers associated with it, these two forms of global society.

So you are looking at the dimensions of multicultural in this globalisation. But over the last ten years you've moved specifically into looking at the arts, and the black visual arts. Can you tell us something about this move to the visual? Do you think the black visual arts in Britain represent a privileged way of looking at questions of race and diaspora at the moment?

Let me just say a few words about how the two things are connected. As you know, I don't like the word multiculturalism, but I am interested in the multicultural question. And what that is, for me, is this: how are people from different cultures, different backgrounds, with different languages, different religious beliefs, produced by different and highly uneven histories, but who find themselves either directly

Living with difference

connected because they've got to make a life together in the same place, or digitally connected because they occupy the same symbolic worlds - how are they to make some sort of common life together without retreating into warring tribes, eating one another, or insisting that other people must look exactly like you, behave exactly like you, think exactly like you - that is to say cultural assimilation? How can we recognise the true, real, complicated diversity of the planet - societies produced by different forms of development, etc - which is what constitutes difference? Different histories, different cultures, over long periods of time, have produced a variegated world, but the barriers are now breaking down. People find themselves obliged to make a common life or at least find some common ground of negotiation. Cultural absolutism is the great enemy of this multicultural project. The multicultural question, then, is: how can we do that without giving up the investments which people have made in what makes them who they are, which is what I call difference.

Cultural difference doesn't mean that I am totally different from you. But I come to the present, to who I am, by a different route from yours; and therefore our conversation has to recognise that different histories have produced us, different histories have made this conversation possible. I can't pretend to be you. I don't know your experience. I can't live life from inside your head. So our living together must depend on a trade-off, a conversation, a process of translation. Translations are never total or complete, but they don't leave the elements exactly as they started. I don't want to be you. I don't want you to be me. I don't want to insist that you give up being who you are and become me. Well, how are we to proceed? Questions of democracy, questions of equality, questions of difference, all have to be resolved. Together - and in ways which are unfamiliar to the culture of the left, which has long grounded its constitutive basis in quite unexpected and unexamined kinds of Eurocentrism, in which the civilizational value of one of those ways of life over all the others is taken for granted. Multiculturalism is a peculiar kind of way of trying to manage the problems which globalisation has created.

And this is only the most recent of the multicultural problems that globalisation has created. It created exactly the same kinds of problem twenty, thirty, a hundred years ago. One multicultural question has been how black people and white people are to live together in the post-plantation-slavery Caribbean, when for centuries one race had simply assumed its civilizational superiority over the other; another is how Muslims and Christians are to live together, today, in Darfur. We are looking at new

Soundings

forms of the same question, produced by a new form of capitalist globalisation. And it has now arrived right into the middle of the societies that have lived the last two hundred years pretending that they could draw a boundary between themselves and the others; or that they could govern the others but at a safe distance which didn't threaten their cultural homogeneity; or that they could regulate the lives and the economies of other people because they were or looked different, and this provided a legitimate basis for their exploitation. I am interested in the impact on these European societies in particular - since that's the most 'developed' form of life we have - of having to live with difference, with people who dress differently, speak differently, have different memories in their heads, know a different way of life, follow a different religion - how are they going to live in greater equality but also *with difference*? How are these often conflicting objectives - equality and difference - to be reconciled?

If I give up my burka will you give up your union jack? What is it the difference that I'm willing to die for? What difference is so important to me that I'm going to fight for it, that I'm willing to murder you for it? Or am I willing to have a trade-off? Am I willing to negotiate with you to live in relative peace? That trade-off is going to be an untidy row. Don't think it is going to be what is called, these days, social cohesion - which is a polite form of assimilation of 'the other', and represents in effect the abandonment of the multicultural principle. There is going to be nothing cohesive about it at all. It's going to be a bloody great row. Any form of democratic life - and I'm not talking about political democracy only now - is a big, staged, continuous row. Because there are real differences, and people are deeply invested in them and so they have to find ways - difficult ways - of negotiating difference, because it's not going to go away.

Now, you can have a political argument about that, and I'm interested in the politics of negotiation that could make multicultural societies a possibility in the future. Iraq and Afghanistan are different examples of the failure of this project of negotiation between different ways of being in the modern world. But I am also interested in how the other - how difference - operates inside people's heads. And if you want to learn more, or see how difference operates inside people's heads, you have to go to art, you have to go to culture - to where people imagine, where they fantasise, where they symbolise. You have to make the detour from the language of straight description to the language of the imaginary. Unless we can deconstruct the colonised imaginary which governs the heads of a substantial number of

Living with difference

British people we will never live multiculturally with difference. I have always been interested in the 'straight' argument, but also in the argument by indirection. So, the visual arts is not a surprise. I've always been interested in culture because it is the domain of indirection. As Shakespeare once said, 'By indirection find direction out'.

Of course the real world, the historical world, the political world, has the most enormous bearing on culture, but the one thing we can't say is that culture simply reflects this other world. It is connected with it, but unconsciously, at some profound level - and we can't decode one world directly into the other. This is the mysterious place where art arises from experience, is at the same time different from experience, and reflects critically back on it. This is the invisible point of intersection between the social and the symbolic. We have to take one step back and go through the imaginary to enter the domain of culture.

Sometimes people say to me that cultural studies thinks culture is everything, but I don't think that at all. I think culture is very important, more than important - it's absolutely *constitutive*. But it's also one among other things - how could you not be also interested in capital, or war, and be alive today? Of course culture isn't everything. But culture is *a dimension of everything*. Every practice exists in the material world and simultaneously signifies, is the bearer of meaning and value. Everything both exists and is imagined. And if you want to play in the area where deep feelings are involved, which people hardly understand, you have to look at culture. People don't understand what it is that terrifies them about difference. They don't know what it is that disturbs them viscerally about people who don't look or think like them. What is it? It gets them somewhere in there, but it is not a place that you can get to by reasoning with them. (Have you ever tried to say 'you should give up your racist prejudices because they are rather irrational'? Forget it.) The common response to our fears about difference is to split the other from ourselves, symbolically expel them from the body social so that we can project on to them our deepest fears and fantasies. So, if you are interested in a society which somehow learns, painfully, how to begin to live with difference, to recognise the way in which it has constructed the other as the opposite of itself, you have to understand how the culture is working. In the arts things get said in ways in which they can't get said in any other domain. So I'm interested in people who are living here who come from different cultures, whose route to the present is different from that of the 'native', and who now also confront the difficult conundrum of difference. And in what this

Soundings

has done to the dream of equality and justice. I'm interested in what people imagine, how they imagine, how they represent themselves, figurally, in the visual and literary field, how they position themselves in the narratives of self and society. And I am committed to the wider society having a greater access to these visions and dreams and nightmares and traumas and fears. So, the turn to the visual arts.

[question from audience] What would you say to the proposition that people should ignore difference as opposed to embracing it, that they should focus on what we share, and shared experience?

That is a big and complicated questions. I used to think that, basically, we are all human beings, and so what one should do is ignore the differences and find the commonality. Of course we are indeed all human, but I'm afraid I came to think, at a certain point in my life, that our common humanity is not enough. What makes us distinctive is indeed the particularities, the specificities, of our historical and other experiences. There's a phrase by Marx - why is it that one might be hesitant to quote Marx? - that, of course, people are all unified in the fact that they are all human, but that what matters more are the different social categories into which people are divided: slave and slaveholder, worker and capitalist. It is the distinction between slave and slaveholder that registers historically. That's where the trouble begins. That's where the conflict over wealth or interest arises. And analytically that's more important than what Marx calls the more 'chaotic' generality or understanding of the humanity we all share. That, in some ways, was a very difficult proposition for me to accept; it is a more difficult route to follow. However I do think that difference doesn't go away. Difference is ineradicable.

Of course, it's not absolute. Of course there are things we all share as human beings, and this impels us to find common forms, in order to make a life in which we don't destroy one another, or oppress one another, or make the other object before us. But these will be common forms that recognise the diversity of human histories, human cultures, languages and so on. The more difficult but greater ambition, then, is to try to recognise and generalise those differences, so that what or who begins as 'other' to us, outside us, can be gradually taken into us, without requiring it to *become* us. Ernesto Laclau argues that this process of trying to expand the universe of demands so as to take in and include those interests and ambitions

Living with difference

which begin as different from, and 'other' to, us and ours is the only 'universalism' there is - an always-unfinished process of universalization. It's a difficult operation - but I think we'd better try to find a way through that if that's really how it works. I think, now, though I didn't for a long time, that it's a more complicated, more difficult, but wider ambition than relying on the universalism of our common humanity - particularly since the masking or disavowal of difference always involves the operation of some kind of power over 'the other'.

I don't want other people to be like me. I don't know why they should be. I don't think my experience is rich enough to embrace the existence of the rest of the world. I have to find a way of recognising that I cannot be self sufficient in myself. I am, from the moment of birth, from the moment of entry into language and culture, dependent on that which is different from me. Otherwise love is self love, love is narcissism, love is locked in solipsism, never gets out of the confines of the reflection in the mirror. It's not enough. We are dependent on the other - to feed us, to recognise who we are, to speak a language. Our common humanity, which is what you are speaking about, is the process of reciprocity with that which is not us, which is other than us, which is different. So I hope that when we tear each other apart, we'll find a little bit of common humanity, just so that we don't fall into what Hobbes called the war of all against all. But humanism is not any longer quite enough for me.

[question from audience] Could you say something about the early 1960s, the time of the new left, when we were serious and dedicated about our politics, but there was also a fun side - we talked about the cinema, good food. I was wondering if you could talk about some of the influences of that time and how that led to your move into cultural studies.

That was a very important moment for me, and one of the most important things was the recognition that political and economic questions were grounded in, and dependent on, the cultural. The conception of politics had to be expanded in order to deal with cultural questions. So it wasn't simply that we liked to go to the cinema, or we were interested in *Look Back in Anger* and the theatre and so on; we saw these things as constitutive of political subjectivities. You couldn't be a political subject - having an economic programme, urging political mobilisation, identifying with the oppressed, the exploited, etc - without also thinking about what were the ideas that held these structures in place, legitimated them. Culture, we came to believe,

Soundings

was constitutive. Economics was constitutive but so was culture. The conditions of existence were cultural, political and economic. All three things had to be articulated to make sense of any situation, event or conjuncture. That's why people like Raymond Williams, who expressed this idea in what may now seem rather simple terms, were so important to us in the early days of the new left.

This may come as a surprise to many people, but I saw cultural studies as the pursuit of that politics in another place rather than as a career. I went into it because I wanted to go on pursuing those questions. I saw cultural studies, in the early stages at any rate - it later became something else - as a way, within an academic and intellectual framework, of pursuing the same kind of questions that lay at the root of what had created the new left in the mid 1950s.

So the things that you talk about were one of the most important contributions that the new left made to the political. But I would go beyond that. We didn't recognise, any of us, at that moment, that this too was a new conjuncture, the conjuncture in which culture, in terms of the cultural industries, was beginning to play an economic and political and social role of enormous importance. The cultural industries were becoming - and again I use a Marxist phrase - part of so-called material production. Culture is now as integral to how these societies work, how the global society works, as the economic itself. All economics these days is cultural, as all culture is economic. In that sense, I am not talking about having a politics, and then being interested in the cinema, I'm talking about a redefinition of the political itself, an expansion of the notion of the political to include the cultural.

Then, of course, there's the new and major expansion of the political that occurs in the 1960s, especially in feminism, which expands the political to include all kinds of new domains - the politics of the family, the politics of the bedroom, the politics of sexuality, the politics of food. When the new left in the 1950s and later were talking about all politics being cultural, we didn't get to that, we didn't come anywhere near that.

I think you may need to go back to the question about good food and the pleasure principle.

The important thing about pleasure is that it can't be easily corralled to any political tendency or party - to recognise the very explosive, boundary-shifting nature

Living with difference

of pleasure. This is part of the history of how I have had to transform my own head. I transformed it about culture, I transformed it about gender and sexuality, I transformed it about difference - I have gone on transforming it - which is why I don't believe in identity as a fixed principle. I've had to learn about the nature of pleasure. I didn't think politics had anything to do with pleasure - and pleasure is a very deceptive political value. Pleasure, as I was saying earlier about art, addresses your subjective investments in ways over which you have less control, in ways that are less conscious, less under the rational inspection of your purposes and intentions. It plays across the boundaries. It connects you with people you shouldn't like, for instance. It makes you love your political enemy, or see something positive in people that you quarrel with. I suppose my life has been changed precisely by this awareness that within the political domain, though politics is always composed of antagonisms - it's nothing if there aren't people who take different positions - these antagonistic positions are never ones which exclude the other, they can't exclude the other. And the question of pleasure enters into this understanding, that one cannot construct one's political opponents as a mirror image of oneself.

[question from audience] What would you say to those who point out that encouragement of the assertion of difference and our multiple specificities is also the project of neoliberal capitalism, and, even as it works always and everywhere to undermine difference, it wants to sell back to us our flimsy affirmations of what our differences might be?

Yes, that is one of the most difficult and perplexing questions that I have had to think about, because, of course, contemporary consumer capitalism absolutely loves difference. It thrives on difference of a certain kind. It creates a niche market before you can say hello, overnight. The proliferation of difference is therefore a complicated thing because it brings you so close to that aspect of the system that you are trying to contest.

This is a question about a lot of my work, that I have come dangerously close to that against which I want to stand. I've come close to Thatcherism, and I sometimes sound as if Thatcherism is the best thing since sliced bread - because in the 1980s it understood hegemonic political struggle in a way in which the Labour Party simply didn't. And I've come close to difference, which is, after all, simply an aspect of modern consumerism and the market. And cultural studies comes very close to

Soundings

celebrity and commodified culture. You like popular culture, and before you know what you are saying there is no difference between commodified popular culture and serious culture, and one is in danger of falling into a false kind of cultural populism.

I don't know how to answer this critique in a principled way - that is to say, I don't know what general principle is in operation. What I know is the strategy. I know I have to get close to that against which I want to mount an argument. I have to understand from the inside how it works and what it is about. This has to do with this failure of any field to polarise itself into absolute opposites. Of course a lot of popular culture is simply the commercialised repetition of formulae, but at the same time popular culture includes feelings and experiences which have not got expressed in the dominant culture, in high culture, and without which you don't understand, actually, how ordinary people are thinking and feeling. So popular culture is a complicated combination of the commodified and the experientially significant. You can't draw a simple line between high culture and popular culture. It has to be a line drawn within popular culture. You have got to get into the field in order to see where the critical distinctions occur. So I have to go with difference in order to see which differences don't matter a damn, which differences are just a repetition of superficial market varieties - if you make soup, you make a thousand varieties of them, but it doesn't make a difference. These are differences that don't make a difference. But paradoxically you have to get close to understanding why differences of that kind appeal, become pleasurable to us, in order to understand those differences which really do make a difference, which constitute the differences of actual experience, the differences of real history. So I can't stand outside the field. I can't make the distinctions and judgements I need to make without getting perilously close to it. I have to run the danger of being assimilated by it in order to know what it really looks like. Only then can I know why it's winning!

This is an edited extract from a conversation between Stuart Hall and Bill Schwarz at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in February 2007. Thanks to Ruth Borthwick and the South Bank Centre Talks Department for permission to publish.