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Review Essay
Stuart Hall's Discursive Turn

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Stuart Hall, *The Fateful Triangle: Race, Ethnicity, Nation*, ed. Kobena Mercer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017, £21.95). Pp. 256. ISBN 978 0 6749 7652 8.

Recalling his work as cofounder and contributor to *Universities and Left Review*, or the ULR group, in the lead-up to the founding of cultural studies during the 1950s, Stuart Hall noted that much of that work had to do with the United States. "In geopolitical terms we were of course neutralists, hostile to the politics emanating from the State Department in Washington," Hall wrote, "but culturally we were nonetheless attracted by the vitality of American popular life, indeed to the domain of mass culture itself."[1] If the ULR group and similar collectives shared an "anxiety about the stupendous power of the booming consumer capitalism of post-war America," they were also united by an appreciation for the ways the "vitality and raucousness of American culture certainly loosened England's tight-lipped, hierarchical class cultures and carried inside it possibilities – or the collective dream? – for a better future, which we felt was a serious political loss to deny."[2] Not unrelatedly, by the 1960s and 1970s, cultural studies and certain quarters of American intellectual life were proceeding along comparable tracks. Many American scholars and at least some working in cultural studies moved toward social history that emphasized the "hidden experiences of subordinated groups and classes."[3] Undertaken in concert with the new social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, this version of social history would ramify widely, furnishing the very questions and analytic habits of many fields, not least American studies.

Yet cultural studies had a number of distinguishing features, perhaps chief among them a tendency to seek out historical research "fit for a more self-consciously theoretical method."[4] "Methodologically," wrote Richard Johnson, this meant "arguing against the empiricist sidelining of conceptualisation."[5] The significance of conceptualization led Hall and others to immerse themselves in theorizations of social formation, including, notably, key texts by Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser.

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[1] Stuart Hall, *Familiar Stranger: A Life between Two Islands*, with Bill Schwarz (London: Allen Lane, 2017), 245. [2] Ibid.
[3] Richard Johnson, "Entangled Histories: Introduction," in Ann Gray, Jan Campnell, Mark Erickson, Stuart Hanson and Helen Wood, eds., *CCCS Selected Working Papers*, Volume II (London: Routledge, 2008), 761–73, 762. [4] Ibid., 768. [5] Ibid., 769.

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"Ideology" became the term around which the search for theoretical resources – and much of cultural studies – became organized. Yet over time Hall arguably helped dislodge the ideology concept of its primacy, putting forth several other qualifying and alternative terms as he came to insist that ideologies "do not operate as single ideas; they operate in discursive chains, in clusters, in sematic fields, in discursive formations."[6] By the time Hall traveled to Harvard University for a set of lectures in the mid-1990s, the "discursive" had become his central concept. If the term afforded ways of pursuing long-standing questions of ideology and ideological struggle that had defined the cultural-studies project, it also signaled a decidedly different theoretic moment. The "discursive" emerges as something of a necessary starting point for thinking about Hall's writings in the 1990s, and for considering the critical inflections they acquired during that period.

The Fateful Triangle: Race, Ethnicity, Nation makes available for the first time in published form three lectures Hall delivered in 1994 as part of the W. E. B. Du Bois Lectures. Working with handwritten notes and amended transcripts, art historian and critic Kobena Mercer assembled the lectures, and he writes in his introduction that they provide a "succinct distillation of the fertile development that [Hall's] thinking on race, ethnicity, and nation went through as issues of diaspora came to the forefront of his work in the late 1980s and early 1990s" (3). The lectures present some of Hall's most trenchant observations on "why the race concept stubbornly persists, despite every demystification," and they help to demonstrate why he valued what I am calling a "discursive turn" as important for addressing that persistence (3). If many regarded Hall, who died in 2014, first and foremost for his role in the emergence of cultural studies, others would come to know him primarily through his work as an analyst of racial ideologies and their complex workings in the West, and above all in imperial and postimperial phases of British history – subjects that would come to define the latter phases of his intellectual trajectory.

Born in Jamaica in 1932, Hall studied at Oxford and would, in the 1970s and 1980s, become known for his careful exploration of the forces that led to, and sustained, the authoritarian populism that was Thatcherism. The focus on the political emergence of Thatcherism led Hall to consider matters of race in more systematic ways than he had in previous work, and to turn his attention to a "specifically indigenous British racism."[7] There needed to be trenchant parsing of the "striking success" that Thatcherism achieved precisely in the "area of race," Hall wrote in *The Hard Road to Renewal*, reflecting on the ways the extreme racism of the National Front had been "recuperated to the 'legitimate' terrain of parliamentary politics."[8] The writings of the Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci served Hall as a major resource as he sought to analyze the distinctive features of late twentieth-century Britain, and readings of Gramsci would catalyze Hall's more sustained work on race. By the time of "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity," a distinct period of critical work on both racism and racial ideology was well under way. Originally delivered in Paris, in 1985, as part of a UNESCO conference, "Gramsci's Relevance" developed an argument about the limits of materialist frameworks for the analysis of racism,

[6] Stuart Hall, *Cultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History*, ed. Jennifer Daryl Slack and Lawrence Grossberg (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 137.

[7] Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (London: Verso, 1988), 133.

[8] Ibid.

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and for the value of Gramsci's concerns with popular ideas and the consolidation of certain kinds of "common sense" for interpreting racism as part of a complex ideological field.[9] Although Gramsci's name is absent from the lectures, the avowedly "discursive" turn in Hall's thinking had much to do with his immersion in Gramsci's thought, which afforded a kind of transitional theoretic workshop for Hall's subsequent discursive meditations.

At the crux of the first of the three lectures, "Race: The Floating Signifier," is what Hall calls the "discursive conception of the politics of race," which in turn informs the subsequent two lectures, "Ethnicity and Difference in Global Times" and "Nations and Diasporas." Hall's discursive conception presupposes that signifiers work along a chain of equivalences, and that race, too, works along such a chain, one that links it to putatively biological certainty. It is through metaphor and metonymy that "signifiers of epidermalization," or what in everyday parlance we refer to as "race," acquire their status as commonsensical truths. It is because race is continually invested with metaphoric potential, and is in that way given expansive, "floating" capacities, that in many societies it is merely a feature of everyday life to "*read* the bodily inscription of racial difference and thus render it intelligible" (63, original emphasis). Yet his "discursive–genealogical account," as he called it, drawing variously on Foucault, Derrida, and Ernesto Laclau's writings on "chains of equivalence," was already evident when he published "New Ethnicities" (1987). In that essay he wrote that "events, relations, structures do have conditions of existence and real effects outside the sphere of the discursive; but only with the discursive, and subject to its specific conditions, limits, and modalities, do they have or can they be constructed within meaning."[10] The lectures impart Hall's conviction that a discursive conception of race is critical for the analysis he urges upon his readers of the hierarchical system that produces "race" and its powerful "hold on the human imagination" (33). The discursive becomes paramount in the Harvard lectures, and is no longer referred to as a discrete "sphere."

"Race: The Floating Signifier" is structured to an extent as a response to arguments put forth in the mid-1980s by Kwame Anthony Appiah about W. E. B. Du Bois. Hall sees race as "one of those major or master concepts that organize the great classificatory systems of difference that operate in human societies," and he is interested in the ways Appiah parses what Du Bois had to say about race over his long career. Of special significance to Appiah was the matter of how systematically and fully Du Bois had rejected a biological conception of race in favor of a sociohistorical one, and he concluded that Du Bois had come "gradually, though never completely, to assimilate the unbiological nature of races" (16). Hall finds himself in broad agreement with Appiah's assessment, but he balks at particular turns in its progression. The main one of these turns is Appiah's general claim that a rigorous reading of Du Bois and his fluctuating conceptions must follow from a concern not only with the "meaning of race" but also with the "truth of it" (43). Hall's bewilderment comes across on the page: "Since when has the discourse of race … let alone its real effects, been determined by 'the truth' in this absolute sense?" (43). By invoking "the truth," Appiah veers from where Hall seems to think he is going. He thus argues that what is "still missing from this dismantling of our problem is an account of how race works *discursively*, and the centrality of its status

[9] Stuart Hall, "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity," in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. Kuan-Hsing Chen and David Morley (London: Routledge, 1996), 411–40.

[10] Ibid.

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as a signifier to its deadly operations in the world and to its real effects" (43–44). Hall's response recalls a quip by the literary critic Kenneth Burke: "I question whether a theory of meanings can be put forward simply in the reassuring name of 'the facts.'"[11]

In "Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance," from 1980, Hall's words hint at what will become his fully fledged discursive conception of racial politics. The essay emphasized the concept of "articulation" (the joining of disparate discourses and attendant practices) in order to describe how certain configurations of power acquired seemingly inevitable racial lineaments. Articulation offered a way to bring into view the kinds of political, economic and ideological binding that gave classes and individuals powerful incentives to understand themselves in terms of race. If a discursive conception of race was already implicit in that essay, Hall's criticism nevertheless had a different idiomatic character from the one on display in the Harvard lectures. He tended to write about "representation," not "discourse." Moreover, he gave "class" a more abiding analytic function, as when he described race as a "modality in which class is 'lived,' the medium through which class relations are experienced."[12] The essay also had more to say about racism itself, and it is worth recalling his enduring formulations on the subject. Hall insists on analyzing the "concrete historical 'work' which racisms accomplish under specific historical conditions."[13] Among the difficulties entailed in such analysis is that racisms themselves "dehistoricize – translating historically specific structures into the timeless language of nature."[14] Still, in the examples from postwar Britain he cites, the discursive begins to come to the fore, especially inasmuch as racism is "not only a problem for blacks who are obliged to suffer it," but pivotally involves the "interpellations of a racist ideological syntax" that affect the entirety of a given social order.[15]

Although not a part of Hall's earlier work, and absent from an essay like "Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance," the term "ethnicity" comes to the fore in the second lecture, which is titled "Ethnicity and Difference in Global Times." The resurgence of ethnicity under conditions of globalization compels Hall to ask what consequences a focus on ethnicity might have for politics. On one level, ethnicity is a kind of resource for understanding how identities are narrated and "placed" (105). But Hall is not "overly optimistic" about the "return to ethnicity," for what it signals above all is the heightened significance of "generalized antagonism" or a "proliferation of social antagonisms" (97–98). The antagonisms make it an analytic obligation to think through ethnicity since, like race and other discursive markers, it forms part of the overall production of difference that is itself an emblem of the global capitalist economy. Yet by the end of the second lecture, Hall, despite his lack of optimism about the return of ethnicity, nevertheless sees a silver lining: "historically marginalized and oppressed peoples" might "exploit the global proliferation of difference *to produce themselves as new subjects*" (124, original emphasis). Hall's reference to new subjects should be read in relation to his other writings from the period, but especially vis-à-vis "Gramsci's Relevance," where he argued,

[11] Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973; first published 1941), 399.

[12] Stuart Hall, "Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance by Race," in Houston A Baker, Jr., Manthia Diawara and Ruth H. Lindeborg, eds., *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 16–60, 53.

[13] Ibid., 52. [14] Ibid., 57. [15] Ibid., 56, 55.

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absorbingly, that racism involves, among other things, the "'subjection' of the victims of racism to the mystifications of the very racist ideologies which imprison and define them."[16] Hall envisioned the production of new subjects working in dialectical manner with the eradication of racism.

The malleability of ethnicity discourses and the proliferation of differences set up Hall's discussions of diaspora in the closing lecture. A guiding premise is that diaspora and the "planned and unplanned dispersals" characteristic of the accelerated pace of late twentieth-century globalization unsettle the "self-conception of all national cultures." But what matters more for Hall are the "dialogic moves" that such thinking affords. No longer the diaspora of lost authenticity, the "new conceptions of diaspora" constitute the recurring subject of Hall's final lecture, "Nations and Diasporas." Hall throws his critical lot in with the new diaspora thinking, which acquires aspirational connotations in his prose, and feels, after the careful delineation of his discursive approach, both fitting and hard-won. The emergent conceptions of diaspora suggest new ways of inventing identities that do not rely on "any one single narrative of belonging." Yet from our vantage point it will also inevitably seem that Hall's view about the new uses of diaspora – that they would lead to the waning of "'cultural difference' in its strong sense," for instance – was premature, or at best unevenly realized. "The question is not *who we are* but *who we can become*," he writes (174, original emphasis). Much of political culture in Britain and the US today has to do with the persistence of the former question. More generally, the two questions may be far more entangled, less easy to decouple, than cultural theory in the mid-1990s sometimes implied. Hall argued persuasively for "neither the refusal of difference nor its hardening and fixing, but its constant and ongoing negotiation." But that the negotiation could itself affirm difference "in its strong sense," and prioritize "*who we are*" in absolutistic terms of race and nation, may not have been contemplated to the degree warranted. "But can cultures of hybridity be entirely responsible for articulating more livable forms of imagined community?" Mercer asks in his introduction (24). He concludes that for Hall culture was best understood "not as an answer to political predicaments but as the access point to a bigger picture of crisis conditions whose irresolution means the present is still open to the unpredictable factor of contingency" (25). The response, useful as far as it goes, does not quite put the question to rest. Mercer's question is a reminder that Hall's work, for all its dissemination and influence, has not elicited the sustained critical exploration one might expect. A study such as Alberto Moreiras's *The Exhaustion of Difference: The Politics of Latin American Cultural Studies*, which devotes a small but cogent set of pages to Hall's late work, is an exception that proves the rule.[17]

What remains compelling in Hall's observations on identities and the proliferation of difference is that they cannot be conflated with simplistic identity talk.

Indeed, Hall is forever evading the formulaic versions of identity politics. Not susceptible to what he calls "that other version of fundamentalism, 'political-correctness'" (152, 157, original emphasis), by which he implies such identity politics, Hall was after a way to read and navigate a world in which "conventional alignments of left/right, progressive/regressive, even racist/antiracist" had been disrupted, and

[16] Hall, "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity," 440.

[17] Alberto Moreiras, *The Exhaustion of Difference: The Politics of Latin American Cultural Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

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given way to "*the* decisive frontier of our times," the friction "between closed and open constructions of cultural identity" (152, original emphasis). Homi Bhabha has written that Hall was interested in speaking "*in-between*," in the ways one might "position oneself in the place of interlocution (not identity)."[18] Hall's relevance for our own beleaguered moment is on full display in the last lecture, for even if one concludes that the tensions between divergent constructions of cultural identity constitute only one of many sources of antagonism, those tensions have only acquired more intensity. To say that what Hall called the "fragmentation of cultural codes," like the spread of "styles mediated by current technology," proceeds apace is of course to understate the case (112). Hall's formulations provided ways of anticipating, and may yet prove a resource in conceptualizing, the viral dynamics of today.

The Hall lectures demonstrate how important the metaphor of translation became in his thinking from the mid-1990s onward. Translation enters into his final lecture, when he turns to the storytelling practices of modern nation-states. By "smoothing out the discontinuities of a turbulent and contested history into the uninterrupted flow of a long, unbroken, organic evolution," Hall writes, the "emphasis on timeless continuity operates discursively to translate the confusions and setbacks of historical contingency into something that is to be made intelligible within some larger story" (139). Along these lines, he also argued elsewhere that there was always an "absent presence" involved in all identities, an untranslatable element, though he added that "difference which is untranslatable is not a fixed and essential thing; it is itself the product of a translation and is itself, always, in motion."[19] Questions of translation and the untranslatable fit well within Hall's discursive inquiry, and they are arguably the reason he does not deliver entirely negative or positive verdicts about the "nation" or the "national signifier," which as the products of acts of translation are ever "Janus-faced" (158). Translation also bears upon what Hall has to say about diaspora, the term, along with "nation," that concerns him most in the final lecture. Thinking in terms of diaspora can lead in certain instances to its "function as a signifier of translation across differences," he argues (164). Hall cites the critical-theoretic possibilities of this version of diaspora as emblematic of the work of Bhabha and Paul Gilroy. Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* and Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*, a book of essays that theorized about "cultural translation," were published not long before Hall's lectures.[20]

Among the most interesting things about the lectures is the intermittent story Hall presents about the emergence of antiracism. The lectures register a somewhat buried but nonetheless compelling effort to bring the history of antiracism to the fore not in a celebratory way, but rather in a searching and dispassionate way. Indeed, the lectures include some of Hall's most concise and resonant pronouncements on antiracist struggles organized around identity beginning in the 1960s and 1970s and their dramatic

[18] Homi Bhabha, "'The Beginning of Their Real Enunciation': Stuart Hall and the Work of Culture," *Critical Inquiry*, 42, 1 (Autumn 2015), 1–30, 28, original emphasis.

[19] Stuart Hall, "Modernity and Difference: A Conversation between Stuart Hall and Sarat Maharaj," in Stuart Hall and Sarat Maharaj, *Annotations 6: Modernity and Difference*, ed. Sarah Campbell and Gilane Tawadros (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 1999), 36–56, 40, 51.

[20] See Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); and Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

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effects. "This moment signals the break with the discourse of the Enlightenment universalism and liberal humanism," Hall writes, for "at this point the discourses of antiracism begin to share a contiguous discursive space with other discourses of cultural difference, and we enter definitively into a new post-Enlightenment moment in the politics of cultural identity" (91). Hall neither dismisses nor gives a stamp of approval to this development, for his aim is to interpret the politics of cultural identity as the stuff of modernity itself.

Hall reads the emergence of late twentieth-century antiracism as a "historically specific transformation" of what Du Bois called the "problem of the color line" (86). Hall does not pursue the suggestive claim in detail. His investigations of race, ethnicity and nation do not return to Du Bois's "problem of the color line" per se. Yet the lectures as a whole read broadly as variations on the theme of the transformation of the template Du Bois bequeathed. One can infer that Hall regards Du Bois's arguments against racism as resting on humanistic universalism, and that what happened in the 1960s with antiracism constitutes a "ruptural moment" after which it becomes impossible to merely retrieve and activate that universalism. Yet even here Hall's commitment to discursive analysis remains a priority, lending his exploration of antiracism consistency and persuasiveness. For Hall, antiracism is itself a "signifier of a radically left set of campaigning political strategies" (93). The waning in the British context of what had been the signifier "black," a term that encompassed Afro-Caribbeans and Asians, is partly what seems to prompt Hall's discursive approach to antiracism: "Despite the militant adoption of an antiracist banner, we can see how the politics of such movements actually functioned discursively" (96). As in all of Hall's thinking from this period, discourses themselves have powerful effects, and his argument about the antiracism of the 1960s and onward is not only that it supplanted earlier forms of contestation over racism, but also that it installed the "political recognition, and cultural celebration, of difference" within the field of contestation as such (91). Hall communicates a sense of the disequilibrium brought about by the new dispensation, and even imparts a sense of exasperation about its ensuing havoc, but he mostly makes it the occasion to think anew. His insistence on the discursive seems to follow from his claim, often quoted, that he was "not interested in Theory" in itself, but instead "interested in going on theorizing."[21]

There is something gratifying about having the Harvard lectures available, and also, something distressing about their ongoing salience. The lectures have a tantalizing, if also peculiar, quality that owes to the mix of postponed arrival and palpable relevance. Hall remains a discerning guide to the "*global postmodern*," even if the term itself no longer circulates with the same regularity that made it endemic to much critical commentary of the last century (112, original emphasis). In the most trenchant parts of the lectures, Hall gives equal attention to the new versions of diaspora thinking and the crisis of "centered and unified formations of cultural identity" and the discourses of lament that have followed. Hall's long meditations on authoritarian populism made him all too aware of the powerful attraction that "cultural absolutism or fundamentalism" continued to hold. The lectures are in the end about the "contradictory tension" created by the copresence of promising signs and regressive patterns. He refused to dissemble, dismiss or make palatable those conflicting dynamics for

[21] Stuart Hall, "On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall," ed. Lawrence Grossberg, in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, 131–50, 150.

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which resolutions were not readily available. The lectures are in this way impressive instances of a defining feature of his work: the persistent detection of contradictory yet intimately joined tensions that buffet and produce all manner of modern subjects.

In closing, it is worth noting the inflections that Hall himself gave to the idea of a "turn." "The notion of a turn is important to me," Hall wrote.[22] For him it was

> neither an ending nor a reversal; the process continues in the direction in which it was traveling before, but with a critical break, a deflection. After the turn, all of the terms of a paradigm are not destroyed; instead the deflection shifts the paradigm in a direction which is different from that which one might have presupposed from the previous moment.[23]

The turn from ideology to the discursive retained many things, and the latter did not signal an abandonment of the question of the relation of "race" as a signifier to its "deadly operations in the world." The turn, or marked change of direction in Hall's corpus, calls for more exploration, and the lectures are certainly indispensable for such a task.

Meanwhile, returning to Hall via the discursive could yield interesting things for American studies, perhaps especially as regards his expansive understanding of anti-racism, which, as implied above, becomes in his hands an object of analysis. Scholars in American studies have explored events from the recent past such as the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement for its historical antecedents, for instance, but have only begun to analyze its discursive specificity, the deflection it represents in the long-standing encounter with white supremacy. For that reason it might be explored alongside, rather than simply as a counterpoint to, the white nationalism on display in Charlottesville in 2017. As Hall would no doubt have observed, the events in Charlottesville were also discursively constituted. Under the aegis of the discursive, both developments demand to be read as events by which to track fluctuations and iterations of "race" and its "deadly operations" as they make themselves felt in the present.

[22] Stuart Hall, "Museums of Modern Art and the End of History," in Hall and Maharaj, 8–23, 9.

[23] Ibid.

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