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Book Author(s): SOPHIE SCOTT-BROWN

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Reinventing the Organiser: Anti-authoritarianism, Activist Politics and the First New Left



Raphael Samuel and Jean McCrindle, Trafalgar Square, London, 1956

Raphael Samuel Archive, Bishopsgate Institute, London, courtesy of Alison Light and the Raphael Samuel Estate.

On a wintry evening in November 1956, Raphael Samuel and Jean McCrindle, a picture-perfect communist couple, engaged to be married, went to see a performance of John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* at the Lyric Theatre in Hammersmith, London. The production starred

Richard Pasco as the central protagonist Jimmy Porter who, finding himself increasingly alienated from English society, grows steadily more and more consumed with a destructive anger that brings tragic results for those around him.¹

Following the production, Samuel and McCrindle found themselves in disagreement over the play. As he recalled it, she thought Jimmy Porter's anger a form of middle-class self-indulgence. Samuel had found himself moved by it, responsive to Porter's sad lament for the want of any brave causes. They broke off their engagement.² Their separation was, of course, about more than just a difference of opinion on a play. It was just another example of the way in which the extraordinary events of that year had plunged so many British communists, like Samuel and McCrindle, into an emotional maelstrom that dramatically altered the way they understood the world. For Samuel this was a turbulent time of transition, but also a critical crucible for consolidating what would become the political, intellectual and moral cornerstones of his historical work.

As discussed in Chapter 1, at the beginning of 1956 Samuel was a committed communist and student activist destined, so he thought, for a career within the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). By the end of that year, following the fallout from the Khrushchev revelations and the Soviet invasion of Hungary he had, reluctantly, left the party and become a critical driving force in the creation of the New Left movement, first as an organising force behind the journal *Universities and Left Review (ULR)* (1957–59), then as a member of its editorial collective and chairman of the New Left clubs, later as member of the editorial collective for the *New Left Review (NLR)* (1960–).³

1 Philip Barnes, *A Companion to Post War British Theatre* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble, 1986), 179.

2 Brian Harrison, 'Interview with Raphael Samuel', 18 September 1987, 19 Elder Street, London, transcripts held in Raphael Samuel Archive (RSA), Bishopsgate Institute, London.

3 The New Left was an extremely diffuse movement encompassing many related but distinctive strands. Here it is used specifically to refer to the figures and activities clustered around the two journals *The New Reasoner* (1957–59), edited by E.P. Thompson and John Saville, and *Universities and Left Review* (1957–59), edited by Oxford graduates Stuart Hall, Gabriel Pearson, Raphael Samuel and Charles Taylor. In 1960 these journals merged together to form *New Left Review*, initially edited by Hall (1960–61), then, for one edition, by an editorial collective led by Samuel in 1962 before being taken over by Perry Anderson in 1962. For memoirs of the New Left see: Stuart Hall, 'The Life and Times of the First New Left', *NLR*, 61, Jan–Feb (2010), 177–96; Robin Archer, Diemut Bubeck, Hanjo Glock, Lesley Jacobs, Seth Moglen, Adam Stenhouse and Daniel Weinstock, eds, *Out of Apathy: Voices of the New Left 30 Years On* (London: Verso, 1989).

This chapter focuses on Samuel's role in the New Left. It argues that whilst the changes that he underwent during this time, in particular leaving the CPGB, were dramatic and that many of his endeavours were consequently couched in terms of 'newness', there were strong strands of continuity with his earlier communist values, activist experience and organisational skills. At the same time, this was also a period during which his Marxist 'faith' was challenged and subject to processes of rethinking.

Despite assuming a significant role in the New Left, his contribution has gone relatively unacknowledged. Early commentaries and assessments were first offered by Perry Anderson, the 'heir apparent' following his takeover as editor of *NLR*, the New Left's flagship journal, in 1962.⁴ Concerned to distinguish his own political project from those of his predecessors, Anderson stressed the ambiguities and conceptual limitations of what he perceived as its unexamined appeals to humanist morality.⁵ Subsequent studies have adopted a more contextualising approach but deviate little from Anderson's main conclusions, offering little in-depth analysis of the complex personalities and relationships involved.⁶

More recently, Madeleine Davis has argued the need for a revised perspective on the New Left, stressing the significance of what she terms an 'activist politics' which she identified with the *ULR* contingency.⁷ Davis singled out the extensive infrastructure of the New Left Club network and the Partisan Café as two critical examples of this activist politics in application. Despite this, she made little acknowledgement of Samuel, their primary initiator. This chapter shall demonstrate that it was Samuel who most personified Davis' 'activist politics', which he expressed through the implicit politics of his actions rather than his writing.

4 Wade Matthews provides an extensive discussion of changing interpretive patterns in New Left historiography in *The New Left, National Identity, and the Break-up of Britain* (Leiden and Boston: BRILL, 2013).

5 Perry Anderson, 'The Left in the Fifties', *NLR*, 1/29, Jan–Feb (1965), 3–18. For a later, more considered account see: Perry Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism* (London: Verso Editions, 1980).

6 For an overview of the first New Left see: Lin Chun, *The First British New Left* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1993); Michael Kenny, *The First New Left: British Intellectuals After Stalin* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1995); Dennis Dworkin, 'Socialism at Full Stretch', 'Culture is Ordinary', in *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the New Left, and the Origins of Cultural Studies* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), 45–124. For a critique of New Left literature see: Dorothy Thompson, 'On the Trail of the First New Left', *NLR*, 1/215, Jan–Feb (1996), 93–100.

7 Madeleine Davis, 'Reappraising Socialist Humanism', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 18, 1 (2013), 57–81.

The first New Left and 1950s Britain

The New Left was a product of, and a response to, the rapid social and cultural changes which seemed to define life in 1950s Britain.⁸ These were strange times, both turbulent and jubilant in nature. The British empire was unravelling, America was rising and Cold War tensions simmering. On the home front, the Conservatives were 'modernising' whilst the Labour Party was revising (or attempting to).⁹ The welfare state was a decade old and generally proclaimed a success, unemployment was low and wages were rising. Formerly luxury items became more widely accessible, not only washing machines and cars but record players and televisions conveying a ready-made stream of news and entertainment directly into people's homes.¹⁰

Young people, ever hungry for novelty, asserted their presence as a distinctive social group with spending power, distinguishing themselves from their parents' generation through their receptivity to American music, food, clothes and film.¹¹ Consciousness of different cultures gained impetus from rising migration levels (initially from Eastern Europe, later from Africa, South Asia and the Caribbean), which provided a strikingly visual sense of change and, at the same time, introduced new foods, languages and customs into everyday British life.¹²

By the end of the decade, Britain *appeared* to be a prosperous, forward-facing society, but was all as it seemed? For some, prosperity was an illusion, encouraging a dangerous complacency. In the artistic and literary culture of the time a cynical mode prevailed, characterised by the work

8 For general overviews of this period see: Peter Hennessy, *Having It So Good: Britain in the Fifties* (London: Penguin, 2007); David Kynaston, *Family Britain 1951–1957* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009).

9 See Lawrence Black, 'Must Labour Lose? Revisionism and the Affluent Worker', in *The Political Culture of the Left in Affluent Britain 1951–64: Old Labour, New Britain?* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

10 On consumption and mid-twentieth-century British social and cultural life see: Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); John Benson, *The Rise of Consumer Society in Britain 1880–1980* (London: Longman, 1994); A.H. Halsey and Josephine Webb, eds, *Twentieth-Century British Social Trends* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 342–43; Miriam Akhtar and Steve Humphries, *The Fifties and Sixties: A Lifestyle Revolution* (London: Boxtree, 2001); Andrew Rosen, *The Transformation of British Life 1950–2000: A Social History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

11 Bill Osgerby, 'Youth Culture', in Paul Addison and Harriet Jones, eds, *A Companion to Contemporary Britain* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 128–31.

12 Wendy Webster, *Imagining Home: Gender, 'Race' and National Identity 1945–64* (London: Routledge, 1998).

of ‘movement’ writers such as the novelist Kingsley Amis whose hapless antiheroes, such as Jim Dixon in *Lucky Jim* (1954), made a satire of the petty jealousies and rivalries of smug suburban middle-class life. But aside from mockery, there was little offered by way of an alternative.¹³ Elsewhere anger, frustration and alienation were the dominant motifs. John Osborne’s protagonist, Porter, seemed to speak for a generation when he bewailed the lack of brave causes.¹⁴

The lack of brave causes formed the central New Left problematic. What did affluence, and all its attendant implications, mean for class politics? What impact did increasing levels of social mobility and changes to community composition have for concepts such as ‘equality’ and ‘fraternity’? How was a flourishing mass media, conveyed through accessible technologies, able to influence popular consciousness in unprecedented ways? These were the longer-term issues informing the cohort. In the short term, however, it was the events of 1956 that provided the catalyst for its formal creation.

Events of 1956

On 25 February 1956, the closing day of the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, close to midnight, Nikita Khrushchev delivered a four-hour speech denouncing Stalin, unveiling, as he did so, a devastating catalogue of brutalities ranging from Stalin’s petty and vindictive vanities as a leader to full-scale, systematic atrocities under his leadership. As news of the speech travelled, shock reverberated around both the communist and the wider world. In Russia only a fragment of the speech was published but it was enough to generate a response ‘like the explosion of a neutron bomb’.¹⁵ The revelations sparked a backlash against communist governments in Eastern Europe, with popular uprisings in Poznan, Poland, in June and a later one in Hungary in November.

For British communists, word of the speech filtered out slowly in a disjointed manner. An account of the speech was published in the London *Observer* newspaper in March 1956. *The Daily Worker*, the CPGB’s official paper, began to receive a steady stream of letters from readers horrified at the contents and implications of the speech. At first,

13 Dominic Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good* (London: Abacas, 2006), 158.

14 *Ibid.*, 177.

15 Zhores A. Medvedev and Roy A. Medvedev, *The Unknown Stalin* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 98.

some of these appeared in print but on 12 March 1956 J.R. Campbell, the newspaper's editor, ceased to publish them. Pressure for a more open discussion continued to mount in the following months but still the party's leaders made no acknowledgement or concession, suggesting their meek acceptance of the official party line from Moscow. As Samuel later recalled, the party of his youth had been singularly free of 'rows':

Political differences, so far from being envenomed by personal rivalries – the normal condition of the Labour Party – were suppressed for the sake of comradeship. If there were political divisions on the Executive Committee, the members did not know about them, nor would it have been conceivable for confidential reports to be leaked to the capitalist press – something which passes without comment today. Party proceedings, by comparison with those in the Labour Party, were exceedingly decorous.¹⁶

As such, the CPGB was unaccustomed and, therefore, ill-equipped to respond effectively to the members' need to express and discuss what had taken place. Arguably, it was this failure that prompted many to leave. Some, like Christopher Hill, stayed on in the party for a further year attempting to negotiate democratic changes to its internal structures but eventually conceded that this was not a possibility.¹⁷

The revelations of 1956 had not come out of nowhere. Almost from the beginning of the great socialist experiment in the Soviet Union, there had been rumblings and ominous signs.¹⁸ More recently, the party's line on Spain, the Moscow show trials (1936–38) and the Nazi-Soviet pact (1939–41) had caused a vexing situation for Anglo-Communists. The Cold War had further compounded these tensions as the Soviet Union had tightened the party line, attempting to bring the various branches of national communism into a more rigid unity. This had led to clashes between individual members and party officials.¹⁹

To some extent, the revelations of 1956 were the final straw in an accumulative process of doubts, frustrations and misgivings confirmed once and for all by Khrushchev's ghastly admissions. In another sense,

16 Raphael Samuel, *The Lost World of British Communism* (London: Verso, 2006), 79.

17 Robin Briggs, 'Hill, (John Edward) Christopher, (1912–2003)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

18 For example, anarchist thinkers and activists Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman wrote a letter warning workers about the atrocities they witnessed following a visit to the Soviet Union. The letter was first published by Freedom Press in 1922.

19 See Doris Lessing, *Walking in the Shade: Volume Two of My Autobiography 1949–1962* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997).

these revelations were also distinctive from anything that had gone before. The full extent of the Stalinist purges was now laid bare, as Khrushchev had intended, in the public arena, leaving no possible means of dismissing the information as a distortion at the hands of capitalist forces.²⁰

The Khrushchev revelations and subsequent response to the Hungarian uprising provided one major impetus; the Suez Crisis, which ran almost concurrently, provided another. The crisis, which saw the British Government embroiled in an unedifying military operation with Israel and France to wrest control of the Suez Canal back from the Egyptian Government, demonstrated the prevalence of a mendacious and imperialist cast of mind within the Conservative Government led, at this time, by Anthony Eden. The invasion was met with popular outcry and within 24 hours of it being announced a large crowd marched on Whitehall in protest. Ultimately, Britain was forced into a humiliating retreat from the action after it met with strong international condemnation, in particular from America.

Naturally, communists like Samuel were an active presence amongst the outraged protesters who descended upon Trafalgar Square. But the Soviet suppression of Hungary, just days before, undermined the capacity of any communist to talk convincingly about peace, justice or anti-imperialism. The deeply traumatic effect of this year for many of the party's members cannot be underestimated. McCrindle would later say:

We stayed up all night, or it seemed that way, for the whole of 1956–7, constantly reeling from unbearable revelations, eye-witness accounts, and new tragic stories of wrongful persecution inside the Soviet Union, including, horrifyingly, loyal Party members.²¹

Memoirs by those involved at the time provide further insight into the extent of shock and betrayal many party members felt as the revelations emerged.²² Accompanying these emotions was also a strong sense of humiliation, particularly acute for intellectuals, whose confident, even

20 John Rettie, 'How Khrushchev Leaked His Secret Speech to the World', *History Workshop Journal (HWJ)*, 62 (2006), 182–93.

21 Jean McCrindle, 'The Hungarian Uprising and a Young British Communist', *HWJ*, 62 (2006), 198.

22 *Ibid.*; John Saville, *Memoirs from the Left* (London: Merlin, 2003); John Saville, 'The Twentieth Congress and the British Communist Party', *The Socialist Register*, 13 (1976); Malcolm McEwan, 'The Day the Party Had to Stop', *The Socialist Register*, 13 (1976); Margot Heinemann, '1956 and the Communist Party', *The Socialist Register*, 13 (1976).

arrogant, claims made for communism had been exposed as fraudulent. They were left looking naive and foolish, or, worse still, like liars. Perhaps above all else was sheer frustration at the CPGB's failure to respond.

Disenchanted and outraged, party members John Saville and E.P. Thompson began to publish *The Reasoner*, a critical journal from within the party, which included on its editorial board prominent party intellectuals such as Doris Lessing, along with the anthropologist Peter Worsley and the economist Ronald Meek. *The Reasoner* was intended to act as the forum for discussion that the party had failed to provide.²³ Saville and Thompson produced two editions before being ordered to cease publishing or face 'excommunication' from the party. The two men agreed to produce one further edition in which they planned to state that future publication would henceforth cease: an example of how, despite the revelations, there was not an immediate move to leave the party.²⁴ The concern for many British communists, like Thompson and Saville, was more about forcing the CPGB into some position of reflection and critical response.

The June uprising in Poznan, Poland, had been neutralised through a compromise achieved between the Soviet Union and the Polish government, the Hungarian one was a different matter. The Soviet Union responded to this with force, sending in armed forces to crush it, dashing any hopes that Khrushchev's speech might mean a renewal of the core values of the communist political project. With the British party still flailing in response, Saville and Thompson left the CPGB, urging others to follow them. Around 7,000 CPGB members did so. *The Reasoner* was transformed into *The New Reasoner (NR)*, which declared its intention of formulating a 'new' form of socialist politics, independent from the party structure and apparatus, expressed in Thompson's concept of socialist humanism.²⁵ This was socialism reconstituted from the purely economic implications of Stalinism and restored to a more holistic view of the individual human being as a creative agent; and of socialism as a moral force which, argued Thompson, could be discerned in the early work of Marx and had been even better expressed by the nineteenth-century artist, entrepreneur and socialist, William Morris.

23 John Saville and E.P. Thompson, 'Why We Are Publishing', *The Reasoner*, 1 (1956), 1–3.

24 Saville, 'Edward Thompson, the Communist Party and 1956'.

25 John Saville and E.P. Thompson, 'Editorial', *The New Reasoner (NR)*, 1, Summer (1957), 1; E.P. Thompson, 'Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines Part I/II', *NR*, 1, Summer (1957), 105–43.

Thompson's appeal to socialist humanism, far from a knee-jerk reaction to recent events, was an articulation of views long in gestation. During the 1950s Thompson, at this time a tutor in English literature and history for the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) in Halifax, Yorkshire, had been in search of a means of convincing his worker students of the relevance of literature to their everyday lives. He became 'seized' by the figure of Morris,²⁶ finding in him a striking example of the ways in which Marxist political-economic rationalism could be reconciled with the best qualities of individual human creativity and agency. In 1955, Thompson (with considerable help from Dona Torr) published a biographical study of Morris, arguing for his enduring relevance to contemporary left-wing political thought.²⁷

The publication of the biography had, of course, preceded the events of 1956 and was, as Thompson later acknowledged, studded with 'Stalinist pieties', but within it could be discerned the seeds of his socialist humanism.²⁸ Now detached from the party, he set out his case for socialist humanism and its application to the postwar world in an imposing polemical article, 38 pages in length, bristling with outrage and rich in literary allusion. It concluded with an urgent call to arms: mankind must realise its own creative agency, turn upon the barbarians pressing at the gate and confront its most deadly enemies.²⁹ This was rousing stuff, but despite the assertion of a new political vision, the *NR*, not least in terms of the personnel on its editorial board, still bore a sense of being a journal of ex-communists.

As Michael Kenny argues, Thompsonian 'socialist humanism' was an important and defining coordinate in New Left discourse, further reinforced by a renewal of interest in Marx's early work such as the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (first released by Soviet researchers in 1927), which showed a greater sensitivity for individuality and social alienation.³⁰ This was not to say that there was a consensus surrounding its definition. Even amongst the inner circle of the New

26 'E. P. Thompson [interview by Mike Merrill]', in Henry Abelove et al., eds, *Visions of History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1976), 13.

27 Thompson acknowledges this in his preface. E.P. Thompson, *William Morris, Romantic to Revolutionary* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1955).

28 E.P. Thompson, 'Foreword', in *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).

29 Thompson, 'Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines', 105–143.

30 Kenny, *The First New Left*, 69.

Left milieu, Thompson's invocation of an early Marx and an 'authentic' communism was questioned. For example, Charles Taylor (responsible for translating the 1844 manuscripts from French into English) argued that Stalinism could not be so easily dismissed as an aberrant mutation of the true spirit of Marxism; there was a serious need to scrutinise the inherent authoritarianism discernible within even the earliest work of Marx.³¹

What of Samuel's reactions to the events of 1956? Samuel later described his initial response to these events as one of 'total disbelief', followed by a reluctance to leave the CPGB. He did leave, but was motivated more by loyalty to his friends than from a deeper personal inclination.³² All this might seem astonishing, especially given that the revelations made by Khrushchev inevitably carried an extra dimension of significance for his family. The anti-Semitism of events such as the 'Doctor's Plot' in 1952 combined with the fate of the Jewish anti-fascist committees and of Jews in Russia more broadly, was something that his family, particularly through Chimen Abramsky, the secretary of the CPGB's Jewish committee, was able to gain a lot of information about.³³

The idea that an anti-Jewish sentiment had been so prevalent in the Soviet Union was shocking, especially when considered in light of the horrifying acts of anti-Semitism perpetuated by the Nazis.³⁴ The claim that state communism stood in polar opposition to the authoritarian politics of fascism was no longer credible. Further to this, Samuel's maternal family's Polish roots made the subsequent popular uprising in Poznan *against* the Communist government all the more poignant.³⁵

It could not be argued that Samuel, despite his youth, had been blissfully ignorant of the wider context of international communist politics. He had been no soft Marxist or fellow traveller. On the contrary, he had been an extremely zealous one, thoroughly well versed in party strategy and well informed of all the developments within the movement. He had had close contact with figures who commanded significant roles in the party (such as his uncle); he himself had been the Secretary of the Oxford

31 Charles Taylor, 'Marxism and Humanism', *NR*, 2 (1957), 92–98.

32 Brian Harrison, 'Interview with Raphael Samuel', 18 September 1987.

33 The 'Doctor's Plot': in 1952, an ageing, unwell, and increasingly paranoid Stalin came to believe that Jewish doctors were planning to assassinate him. Scores of Soviet Jews were dismissed from their jobs, arrested, sent to the Gulag or executed. This persecution was accompanied by anti-Semitic propaganda in the state-run mass media.

34 Brian Harrison, 'Interview with Raphael Samuel', 18 September 1987.

35 *Ibid.*

University branch of the party, even having his own minor struggles with the party line over matters such as his campaign against the H-bomb and his collaboration with the Labour Party.

Why had Samuel been reluctant to give up the Communist Party? His primary political role and intellectual energies were first and foremost in grassroots activism rather than political theory or strategy. (As Hobsbawm would later put it, he was ‘an ingrained activist’.³⁶) His political energies and intellectual creativity had therefore been trained upon the pragmatic implications of enacting or facilitating political campaigns and activities rather than focused on the manoeuvres of high politics. There was also the sheer totality of his immersion in communist politics to be reckoned with. His relationship with communism was different from that of Thompson, who had come to it independently in his late teens, or from his friend Stuart Hall who had been sympathetic but never an official party member. It had been almost lifelong in duration, with 13 members of his family, not to mention his wider community, all embedded within a communist network. Like many others, his family had first joined the CPGB because they believed that it stood for social equality, tolerance and democracy. Once inside the party structure, this belief had been entwined into an elaborate code of language, behaviour and values that adherents had understood as the cultural expression and enactment of these beliefs. All this had effectively woven the party and class politics deep into their sense of self-identity. As his mother, Minna, would later say, the experience of breaking with the party was ‘shattering ... far worse than giving up Judaism’.³⁷

So, more in a spirit of solidarity than personal choice, Samuel followed his friends and family members in resigning from the party.³⁸ His response to the situation was not one of a straightforward rejection of communism or of the party. It was complex, entwined with a sense of divided loyalties and confusion. His unwillingness to openly criticise the party caused tension between him and his friends like Hall and Taylor. Unlike some, he found himself incapable of having any bad memories of his communist childhood.³⁹ Nevertheless, he would later acknowledge that a ‘break’ of sorts did occur in thinking as a result of the events of 1956, saying:

36 Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth Century Life* (London: Abacus, 2002), 212.

37 ‘Obituary: Minna Keal’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 1 December 1999.

38 Brian Harrison, ‘Interview with Raphael Samuel’, 18 September 1987.

39 Brian Harrison, ‘Interview with Raphael Samuel’, 20 October 1987, 19 Elder Street, London, transcripts held in Raphael Samuel Archive (RSA), Bishopsgate Institute, London.

I've never been able to recreate a trust in any political leadership ... I would like to, but I've never been able to give my trust or faith to any political leadership of whatever kind since then. So to that extent ... there actually was a break in '56.⁴⁰

Over the summer of 1956, Saville, a family friend of his uncle's, guided him in his first 'faltering steps in opposition' but this process was not a straightforward one.⁴¹ Following the catastrophic events of November, Saville and Thompson's publication of the *NR*, and his eventual official break from the party, his major concern was to avoid the danger of becoming trapped in the negative identity of an 'ex-communist'. The *NR* with its origins as a critical journal *within* the CPGB was, he felt, too closely associated with this identity. He became increasingly concerned to create an opportunity for a new politics to be developed, a 'positive' with which to move on from the rubble left behind by shattered illusions.⁴²

He resumed the elements of political activity that he knew best, had done the most of, and was most proficient at: organisation. As he later put it. 'I really was an organizer and believed in organization and believed really in discipline, I suppose, and it was a belief in unity and above all ... I ... believed in being positive'.⁴³

Whilst the revelations of 1956 had begun what would be a slow process of detaching this organisational role from the specific framework of the party, the skills, instincts and values of the role lent themselves to the creation of a 'new' political project.

Universities and Left Review

Of course, as Samuel would later concede, this project was far from being entirely new.⁴⁴ Its roots were varied but undoubtedly it owed a debt to his interpretation of the 1930s Popular Front, albeit one painted in the thick primary colours of childhood memory. More directly, it was informed by his student days at Oxford, through ventures like the revival of the Oxford

40 Ibid.

41 Brian Harrison, 'Interview with Raphael Samuel', 18 September 1987.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 Raphael Samuel, 'Born Again Socialism', in Robin Archer et al., eds, *Out of Apathy: Voices of the New Left Thirty Years On* (London: Verso, 1989), 39–58.

Socialist Club and the whole lifestyle engendered by student politics: the close friendships across the political spectrum, the late night debates and collaborative political campaigns.

As for Thompson, this new politics borrowed from the older traditions of left-wing libertarianism with its stress on the creative individual, the self-organising community and the workers' control of industry.⁴⁵ But whilst William Morris provided Thompson with inspiration, for Samuel these ideas were more directly conveyed through the work of the historian G.D.H. Cole. During the mid-1950s Cole had presided over a weekly political discussion group, held at All Souls College, Oxford, of which Samuel, always eager to represent a Marxist perspective on any political question going, had been a regular participant. In the spring of 1956, Cole was involved in organising a conference in Paris, attended by Hall, to discuss the formation of an international socialist society based around similar principles of worker autonomy and self-direction.⁴⁶ Another contemporary source of inspiration was provided by the Geneva Group set up by John Berger and Peter de Francia early in 1956, which sought to reunite artists and intellectuals, separated by the ideological divisions of the Cold War, in a shared political debate.⁴⁷

It was out of this blend of old and new that Samuel, Hall, and two other of their close friends, Charles Taylor and Gabriel Pearson, went on to set up the *Universities and Left Review (ULR)*. Its birth had homespun beginnings. The idea started as a private joke between Samuel and Hall about an imaginary journal in which all the small group of friends, with their quirks and concerns caricatured, wrote about their particular political bugbears.⁴⁸ This in-joke moved rapidly into reality as the political events around them intensified.

A letter from Samuel to Hall written on 15 November 1956, shortly after the events in Hungary and literally days after leaving the party, outlined his entire rationale and vision for the journal in extraordinary detail.

45 Often referred to as 'guild socialism', whereby industry is controlled by a number of trade-specific 'guilds' who negotiate amongst each other.

46 Brian Harrison, 'Interview with Raphael Samuel', 18 September 1987; Hall, 'The Life and Times of the First New Left', 178.

47 Brian Harrison, 'Interview with Raphael Samuel', 18 September 1987.

48 Ibid.

This letter demonstrates the extent to which Samuel, typically neglected in accounts of the first New Left, truly was the initial ‘moving engine’ behind the *ULR*.⁴⁹

He opened the letter by clearly indicating the purpose of the magazine (this term is generally preferred to journal in the letters):

[T]he magazine should be designed to appeal to left wing dons especially younger dons – and the more active left wing students. In addition if we can give it a fair amount of ideological content it should appeal to ex University Lefts, to Ex Communists (recent) and liberal Communists still fighting inside the CP (people like Hill and Hobsbawm) and to left intellectuals generally.⁵⁰

It went on to advise that a close working relationship be formed with the Labour Party, not necessarily out of any ideological alignment, but out of a pragmatic acknowledgement that it constituted the political arm of socialism in parliament. He then discussed strategies for achieving a wide readership and for using the *ULR* as a platform for generating networks of associations and affiliations:

It seems to me that the only way to provide for the interests of such diverse groups of readers as those listed above is by printing a large number of readers’ letters in each issue. I think we should aim at printing a minimum of fifteen readers’ letters in each issue. A great advantage of printing so many letters is that people who have had letters printed tend to buy and sell the magazine. By printing a large number of letters we could build up a large network in every University and technical college. If we could have fifteen letters on say ten different topics we could show the range of interest offered by the magazine.⁵¹

He continued allocating roles: ‘yourself and myself as editors. Gary as literary editor. Chuck as ideological editor’, and discussed layout, printing costs and issues regarding distribution.⁵² He also set out proposals for the contents of the first edition. Whilst permitting ‘Gary’ editorial determination over the literary section (no more than three or four pages here), he intervened rather more comprehensively on the ideological

49 Stuart Hall, ‘Raphael Samuel: 1934–1996’, *NLR*, I/221, Jan–Feb (1997), 121.

50 Raphael Samuel to Stuart Hall, 15 November 1956, RS.1: New Left/001, ‘1956’, Raphael Samuel Archive (RSA), Bishopsgate Institute, London.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid. ‘Gary’ is an anglicised version of Gabriel (Pearson). Chuck refers to Charles Taylor. Elsewhere, Stuart Hall is referred to as Stewart.

section (supposedly to be overseen by 'Chuck'), listing what he thought would be appropriate. In total, he made 22 'possible' suggestions for topics and authors including:

The Future of Marxism: An intermediate statement, Eric Hobsbawm; Labour Re-think Economics, Joan Robinson; French Intellectuals and the French Working Class, J.P Sartre; The Class Structure of Britain Today, Stewart Hall; Oxford Philosophy and Socialism, Chuck Taylor; The Marxist view of History: Can it be modified, Ralph Samuel; [this suggestion was accompanied by a note warning that this could cause controversy] and Labour Careerism, Thomas Balogh.⁵³

There were further suggestions, unassigned to authors, on town planning (on which he advised a series of articles) and the British education system.

Having communicated his thoughts to the other editors, a further letter, dated two weeks later (1 December 1956), saw him reiterate what he saw as the key objectives of the journal:

one of our most important tasks will be to create a new mass basis in the Universities for socialist ideas – to greatly enlarge the numbers of those keenly interested in problems of re-thinking, to take the discussion out of the relatively narrow circle of LP, CP and Fabian activists in which the discussion is at present confined. I think that if we are to do this we shall have to present in agit-prop form in each issue the fundamental ethical and political ideals of socialism. Obviously we shall have to do this in ways relevant to contemporary Britain. Obviously we shall have to do this in ways that will have particular appeal to post war intellectuals.⁵⁴

It is striking how the former CPGB organiser showed an acute awareness of the journal's role as a bridge between specific issues and the broader conceptual frameworks they referred to.

For the first edition, the fledgling student editors sought out and persuaded (cajoled) 'senior' figures amongst the intellectual left, including Cole and Thompson, into contributing articles. Samuel worked with particular energy here, applying his personal charm through writing letters and arranging meetings, even travelling the country in order to canvass support amongst some of the best-known figures on the political left. These included several former party members such as Victor Kiernan, Rodney Hilton and Thompson, who, in a polite, rather formal letter

53 Ibid.

54 Ralph Samuel to Stuart Hall, 1 December 1956, RS.1: New Left/001, '1956', RSA.

promised a polemical essay (rather than a study) on intellectuals and the class struggle.⁵⁵ He even tried his luck with R.H. Tawney, the ‘grand old man’ of English socialism, who replied with a handwritten note kindly refusing the request but sending ‘all best wishes for the success of the Review’.⁵⁶

Having gathered together the contributions, the articles were painstakingly cut and pasted together, late into the night, on Hall’s kitchen table in his student digs on Richmond Road, Oxford. (They returned the following morning to find, portentously or otherwise, that Hall’s cat had given birth to her kittens on the mock up.⁵⁷) Samuel was responsible for persuading a publisher to print thousands of copies of the first issue (and to reprint the issue before the first debt had been repaid), which the determined group hauled to and from Oxford railway station on trollies.⁵⁸

The first edition of the *ULR*, which appeared in early 1957, clearly shows the potency of his persuasive capacity. It deviates very little from the outline he had proposed to ‘Stewart’ in November. The opening editorial announced the need for socialist intellectuals to address the damage done by both Stalinism and the ‘miraculous renewal of capitalism’. It made a call for the regeneration of the whole tradition of free, open and critical debate; emphatically refusing to attach itself to a political ‘line’ but positioning itself instead as a forum where the different traditions of socialist discussion were ‘free to meet in open controversy’.⁵⁹

In terms of *ULR*’s content, his original vision was largely realised.⁶⁰ What did not appear in the first issue (the focus on town planning for example) appeared in a later one. One significant omission was his own proposed article on ‘The Marxist View of History’ (another article by him, ‘The Liquidation of the Thirties’, apparently thrown over to the second edition for reasons of space, also failed to materialise). Why these did not appear is inevitably speculative. Perhaps he was pragmatic enough

55 E.P. Thompson to Ralph Samuel, 18 December 1956, RS.1: New Left/001, ‘1956’, RSA.

56 R.H. Tawney to Ralph Samuel, 24 December 1956, RS.1: New Left/001, ‘1956’, RSA.

57 Stuart Hall, oral communication with author, May 2012, Hampstead, London, recording in author’s possession.

58 Hall, ‘Raphael Samuel: 1934–1996’, 121; Stuart Hall, oral communication with author, May 2012.

59 Stuart Hall, Gabriel Pearson, Charles Taylor and Raphael Samuel, eds, ‘Editorial’, *ULR*, 1, 1 (1957), 1.

60 See: ‘Editorial and Contents’, *ULR*, 1, 1 (1957), 1.

to avoid stirring up the controversy that he had warned against. Perhaps he was unable to thoroughly formulate his ideas on these questions yet. Perhaps he was simply too busy organising everything. As it was, he was the only one of the four young editors not to publish a piece, aligned with his personal interests, in the first edition. Whilst offering no explicit statement of his political ideas at this time, he nevertheless retained a silent but omnipresent organisational influence, even providing his personal (home) address for all editorial communications.

Aside from the journal, Samuel was also the primary architect behind the first New Left Club, conceived in the first place as a venue for journal readers to hear the Marxist historian Isaac Deutscher speak. Having hired a room in a Bloomsbury hotel for the event, the *ULR* editors returned from a leisurely Indian meal to find a queue of 700 people impatiently waiting for the event. This was the catalyst for creating a more permanent infrastructure. Relentlessly canvassing the full range of his political network for funds, he managed to procure 7 Carlisle Street, in London's Soho district, as a permanent headquarters for the *ULR* and the New Left Club. Many other New Left readers' clubs followed, with branches materialising up and down the length of the country (clubs opened in Manchester, Sheffield, Cardiff, Fife and Edinburgh amongst others).⁶¹

The clubs came to act by way of 'resource centres', appropriated by various groups pursuing particular campaigns. These were often local and community-based in character. The Notting Hill branch, for example, emerged as a direct community response to the 1958 race riots and concentrated its efforts on promoting local community organisation. In Croydon, one of the afflicted birthplaces of the Teddy Boy, the branch undertook research into youth culture.⁶² One campaign with more nationwide ramifications was the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) which, in the early days of its organisation, made use of the Soho club as a makeshift headquarters.⁶³

Popular concern about the threat posed by nuclear weapons had heightened since the use of the atomic bomb by the Americans against the Japanese in 1945. Following the bombing of the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the final stages of the war, the shocking

61 Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, 212.

62 Kenny, *The First New Left*, 39.

63 Mike Berlin, 'The Partisan Café', BBC Radio 4, First broadcast 4 December 2008.

image of the mushroom cloud and reports of the horrendous death tolls and devastating after effects of the bomb had prompted widespread consternation over the force of these weapons, compounded by the subsequent testing of hydrogen bombs (H-bombs) in the early 1950s.⁶⁴

In November 1957, when the first British H-bomb was tested on Christmas Island, the sinister threat of nuclear power was brought uncomfortably close to home. The first public meeting of the CND in February 1958, held in Central Hall, Westminster, attracted over 5,000 participants and included an impressive line-up of supporters from respected 'elders' such as the philosopher Bertrand Russell to a more glamorous array of left-wing intellectuals and celebrities: Peggy Ashcroft, Doris Lessing, Lindsay Anderson, Kenneth Tynan, Iris Murdoch and of course, E.P. Thompson. The highlight of this movement became the annual Aldermaston marches, the first of which was orchestrated in the library of the Soho club.

Aside from political campaigns, the clubs also played host to a number of study and research groups, meeting for regular discussions or holding courses and summer schools. The intellectual seriousness of these pursuits and endeavours was, on occasion, leavened as the clubs doubled as venues for evening socials such as skiffle or jazz nights.

In order to provide an independent source of finance for the journal and the club's activities, Samuel hit upon the idea of the Partisan Café. The 1950s had seen the massive growth of milk bars and coffee shops in Britain, particularly in London with the first milk bar opening in 1952.⁶⁵ Spying an opportunity to engage and make use of the popularity of this trend (whilst simultaneously reappropriating a capitalist symbol for socialism) the café was envisaged as a space in which all manner of people, from all walks of life, could gather and discuss politics over coffee and food. Samuel's vision was initially rejected by the rest of the editorial board at a late night meeting in Taylor's rooms at All Soul's College. Undeterred, however, he ploughed ahead regardless, eventually persuading his friends through the sheer force of his enthusiasm.⁶⁶

64 Whilst a student at Oxford, Samuel had been a key figure in spearheading a campaign against nuclear testing in 1953. See the 'Peace Issue' of the *Oxford Left*, 16 June (Trinity Term) 1954.

65 Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good*, 140–42.

66 Hall, 'Raphael Samuel: 1934–1996', 122.

The café was established in the basement of 7 Carlisle Street, with the New Left Club and a library on the upper floors. It had large communal tables and an eclectic (or eccentric) menu designed by Samuel himself, which drew inspiration from continental European, Jewish and English cuisines.⁶⁷ The café and the club were successful in attracting people. Hundreds gathered at a time to hear speakers, to play chess (whilst nursing a single coffee) in one of the Partisan's alcoves, or to attend one of the many activities that were based there, which included art exhibitions and film screenings.⁶⁸

Ultimately, it was not a successful business venture. Samuel, an inspired ideas man, was no shrewd business manager, nor, perhaps, did he have much intention of trying to be one. Nevertheless, the café can be seen as symbolic of the driving ethos and motivation underpinning the New Left, particularly as the younger cohort of the *ULR* conceived it. What they were trying to do was to make politics a part of everyday social and cultural life, much like it had been for them as students.

The New Left was a time of feverish activity during which he continually drew upon the organiser's persuasive skills in order to convince people to contribute or participate in his schemes. In this sense, his experience of the New Left was less about a theoretical reformulation of socialist edicts and more of an initiative to galvanise a dynamic and diverse popular movement. A further example of this can be seen in his 'response' to one of the early *ULR* debates on 'Socialism and the Intellectuals' (prompted by the polemical essay promised by Thompson for the *ULR*'s first edition).

One of Thompson's main diagnoses of the crisis that had befallen the international socialist movement was his view that it had drifted too far away from addressing large moral questions, an absence he also discerned more generally in 1950s British public debate. British intellectuals, far from rallying against this, were, in some cases, responsible for perpetuating this apathy. Amongst the guilty was the author Kingsley Amis whose pamphlet 'Socialism and the Intellectuals' (Fabian Society, 1957) disparaged the 'political' intellectual as an irrational romantic inclined towards the causes of others for want of one of their own.⁶⁹

67 Ibid.; Hall, 'The Life and Times of the First New Left', 178; Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, 213–14.

68 Mike Berlin, 'The Partisan Café', BBC Radio 4; Stuart Hall, oral communication with author, May 2012.

69 Kingsley Amis, *Socialism and the Intellectuals* (London: Fabian Tracts 304, 1957).

Thompson's 'Socialism and the Intellectuals' responded directly to Amis and criticised those who had retreated from the front line, and urged intellectuals to reenter the fray:

Goodness knows that human reason and conscience are imperfect instruments enough; they glow fitfully amongst the bric-a-brac piled all around, which threaten at any moment to topple over and extinguish their light – self-interest and self-esteem, indigestion, guilt, class conditioning, memories of the woodshed, old superstition, the lot. But we continue our intellectual work because we believe that, in the last analysis, *ideas matter*.⁷⁰

Thompson's intellectual appeared as a moral guardian, rising above the 'bric-a-brac' of everyday life, refocusing attention on life's most pressing and important questions.

The article gave rise to a lively debate.⁷¹ Unsurprisingly, there was a general consensus about the need for intellectuals to reengage with popular and public debate, but the nature of this engagement was not unproblematic. How should the relationship between the intellectual and the people be configured? The intellectual depended upon on a capacity to retain a sense of distance from the day-to-day concerns that, as Thompson had argued, could overwhelm a sense of the larger picture.

On the other hand, too much distance left the intellectual an isolated figure whose words of warning and wisdom gained no popular audience. Furthermore, where were these intellectuals going to come from? The figure of the working-class autodidact, self-schooled in politics, seemed to belong to a different age.⁷² How was an intelligentsia that evolved from the working classes to be encouraged? What values should the public intellectual espouse? On close scrutiny, how universal was Thompson's conception of socialist humanism and how was it to be integrated with Marxist principles of political analysis?⁷³

70 Thompson also revisited this issue in his essay 'Outside of the Whale' a pointed inversion of George Orwell's earlier essay 'Inside the Whale'. E.P. Thompson, 'Socialism and the Intellectuals', *ULR*, 1, 1 (1957), 33.

71 Mervyn Jones, 'Socialism and the Intellectuals – One', Harold Silver, 'Socialism and the Intellectuals – Two', Charles Taylor, 'Socialism and the Intellectuals – Three', Rodney Hilton, 'Socialism and the Intellectuals – Four', and E.P. Thompson, 'Socialism and the Intellectuals – A Reply', *ULR*, 1, 2 (1957), 15–22.

72 Silver, 'Socialism and the Intellectuals – Two', 17–18; Taylor, 'Socialism and the Intellectuals – Three', 18–19.

73 Ibid. See also Charles Taylor, 'Marxism and Humanism', *NR*, 2 (1957), 92–98.

Samuel's voice was not amongst those who joined the direct debate. He did, however, pass comment on the matter in the 'A Left Notebook' entry published in the same edition, where he suggested that the crucial test for British Marxist intellectual creativity should be how socialist thinkers responded to contemporary issues like consumer capitalism and cultural change. Pointing to the New Left clubs, he claimed them as a living example of socialist thinking revitalised and put into action. Although brief, the entry was studded with loaded meaning: a socialist theory that was sent down, ready-made, by intellectuals or party officials from above was not just undesirable, but 'a libel on the Socialist tradition'. Conjecture about the theoretical 'role of the Socialist intellectual' on behalf of 'ex-communists' was tantamount to a form of 'moral cleansing', a direct response to the turmoil caused by the break from the party.⁷⁴

Whilst his comments only referred to the debate indirectly, the notebook entry can be viewed as enacting the alternative role that Samuel saw for the intellectual. Firstly, there was its form as a *notebook* entry rather than a polemical essay or serious study. As a mode of communication it was informal; informative rather than instructive in nature. It summarised and disseminated information about what had taken place, the key points to be extracted from these actions and what was intended in the future. For example, 'The Town Planning study group aims to synthesise of town planners, architects, sociologists, economists and councillors in an attempt to recapture and carry forward the work of the early post-war period' or 'We hope that our Labour Movement History group can provide the nucleus for a Society of Labour Movement History'.⁷⁵

74 Ralph Samuel and Charles Taylor, 'A Left Notebook', *ULR*, 1, 2 (1957), 79–80.

75 *Ibid.*



Raphael Samuel (far left) and others at the Partisan Café, Carlisle Street, London, c. 1959

Raphael Samuel Archive, Bishopsgate Institute, London, courtesy of Alison Light and the Raphael Samuel Estate.

Secondly, the entry was written in his personal capacity as *chairman* (rather than president) of the New Left clubs and working groups. A *chairing* role is not explicitly authoritative; its primary function involves the organisation and facilitation of meetings. Within those meetings, the chair acts to provide guidance or advice. For example, to a group studying contemporary capitalism: ‘it will not be very helpful if members of the Left continue to counter [C.A.R.] Crosland’s arguments with the charge that they are “not socialist”’; or to the Marxist group:

With many Marxists now agreeing ... that their arguments must be developed ‘in such a way that their validity does not depend on any specifically Marxist assumptions’ the way is now perhaps open for a fruitful dialogue on the subject.⁷⁶

There are clear parallels between the club chair and the party organiser. Contrast Samuel’s actions here with his own description of the role of the organiser: ‘at congresses and aggregates [district organisers] would make the opening report and “sum up” at the end ... “little Gods”,

⁷⁶ Ibid.

descending on the branches from time to time to “galvanise” the members into activity’.⁷⁷ Ironically, whilst he sought to distance himself from the authoritarianism of the party or the exercises in ‘moral cleansing’ that other ex-communist intellectuals indulged in, he also re-enacted both the communist attitude and role that he had grown up with, aspired to and practised in his youth.

Cultural questions

Samuel’s reaction to the events of 1956 had been to draw upon the form of politics most familiar to him: grassroots activism and organisation. Nevertheless, this was not a seamless shift but involved a considerable challenge to his existing political ideas. This section explores how he responded to this, with particular reference to his contribution to debates on culture and class consciousness.

In contrast to its counterpart the *NR* (which also launched in 1957), the *ULR* adopted a lighter, more exuberant tone. Its articles were typically shorter, the writing less dense and it contained much more visual imagery.⁷⁸ In its general presentation it bore more resemblance to a magazine format than the traditional, scholarly format of the *NR*.⁷⁹ Thompson was quick to assert the differences that he saw between the two journals. In a letter to Samuel written shortly after the first edition had appeared, he said:

You see we cut different characters: *ULR* is mercurial, sensational, rides loose to theory & principle, goes for gimmicks and so on: all this is excellent, and the right way to break the crust especially with the younger people. The *NR* is middle aged & paunchy and strikes a note of political responsibility, and dogged deaf endurance.⁸⁰

Whilst Thompson’s comment implied the dangers of such eclecticism, the wide-ranging liveliness was indeed calculated to attract the broader, younger readership that Samuel coveted. One of the key differences between the two journals was the extent to which the *ULR* engaged with

⁷⁷ Samuel, *The Lost World*, 122.

⁷⁸ The second edition, for example, carried two photographic supplements: John Smith and Gordon Redfern, ‘The Crisis in Town Planning’; Lindsay Armstrong, ‘Free Cinema’, *ULR*, 1, 2 (1957).

⁷⁹ This would be reinforced in later editions when the *ULR* was printed on glossy paper.

⁸⁰ E.P. Thompson to Ralph Samuel and Michael Barrett Brown, 6 February 1957, RS.1: New Left/002, ‘1957’, RSA.

questions concerning the politics of culture and cultural change, an issue addressed through a close engagement with the work of Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams.⁸¹

In his iconic book *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), Hoggart examined working-class consciousness and the impact of the mass media. Drawing on his own upbringing, he re-created a vivid portrayal of working-class life, presenting a largely pessimistic picture of a narrow, inward-looking world populated by a beleaguered people with a restrictive and intellectually limited cultural life. This depiction was not itself unique but distinctive in the link it made between sociolinguistic ability and conceptual capacity. Working-class culture did not simply reflect working-class sensibility, it also created it.⁸²

The book went on to reflect on how this world had narrowed further as a result of exposure to forms of mass culture that exacerbated its worst aspects, such as shallowness and sensationalism. Assuming the mantle of the cultural critic, he decried mass culture's appeal to the basest of human instincts, typically sex and violence, and lamented the passivity of its consumption, used for short-term pleasure rather than intellectual stimulation. As he said in his concluding comments:

Most mass-entertainments are in the end what DH Lawrence described as 'anti-life.' They are full of a corrupt brightness, of improper appeals and moral evasions ... These productions belong to a vicarious spectator's world; they offer nothing which could really grip the brain or heart.⁸³

Williams was also interested in contemporary cultural change but expressed a more optimistic view than Hoggart.⁸⁴ His book, *Culture and Society* (1958), was a literary history of the idea of culture as expressed by writers and critics from Edmund Burke and the eighteenth-century Romantic poets, through the rapidly industrialising society of the

81 *ULR 2* carried a substantial engagement with *The Uses of Literacy* shortly after its publication in 1957. Raymond Williams became a frequent contributor to the journal, with five articles appearing across the seven editions that were published. See also Stefan Collini, 'Critical Minds: Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart', in *English Pasts: Essays in History and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 210–32.

82 See Stuart Hall, 'Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* and the Cultural Turn', in Sue Owen, ed., *Richard Hoggart and Cultural Studies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 20–32.

83 Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-class Life, with Special References to Publications and Entertainments* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1957), 277.

84 Whilst critical of his colleague on several points, Williams was also concerned to point out the parallels in their work and thought: 'The Uses of Literacy: Working Class Culture', *ULR*, 1, 2 (1957), 29–32.

nineteenth century, and concluding with the first half of the twentieth century, overshadowed by the threat and experiences of war. Williams teased out the tectonic shifts that had occurred in the general meaning of the word ‘culture’, from referring to the possession of a social elite, to identification with intellectuals or artists and, finally, moving towards a term denoting a ‘whole way of life’. Like Hoggart, he acknowledged that culture did not merely reflect the world but was complicit in creating it.⁸⁵

In the final section of the book, he too expressed concern about the mass-entertainment industry. Williams also felt intellectuals had an important educational contribution to make, not by exhorting one standard of cultural excellence over others but in fostering the development of a more diverse common culture. Only through ‘conceding the practice of democracy’, Williams reasoned, could the theory truly be substantiated.⁸⁶

Williams and Hoggart both addressed the impact of cultural change on working-class consciousness. Their books raised strong concerns about the implications of mass culture in impoverishing popular intelligence, moral sensibility and political commitment. The extent to which the ideas of the two men were metabolised amongst the *ULR* contingent can be seen in the ‘Sense of Classlessness’ exchange that went straight to the core of some of the most critical issues confronting the New Left.

Hall prompted the debate, adapting the topic originally allocated to him by Samuel (on the contemporary British class structure). Taking the insights of Hoggart and Williams as his point of departure, Hall argued that changes to *ideas* of class as a distinctive social and political identity were informing far deeper structural transformations in modern British social and cultural life than either of the two men’s analyses had fully appreciated.⁸⁷

Work, he argued, had become an ever more fragmented process, whilst authority in the workplace concealed its claws more insidiously in the forms and language of ‘scientific’ management styles. The relationship

85 Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780–1950* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1958). Williams resumed his study, situating it more deeply in the sociopolitical context of nineteenth-century industrialisation in *The Long Revolution* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961). Both *Culture and Society* and *The Long Revolution* were criticised by Thompson for failing to take fuller account of the significance of class struggle in cultural change. E.P. Thompson, ‘The Long Revolution I’, *NLR*, I/9, May–Jun (1961), 24–33; ‘The Long Revolution II’, *NLR*, I/10, Jul–Aug (1961), 34–39.

86 Williams, *Culture and Society*, 341.

87 Stuart Hall, ‘A Sense of Classlessness’, *ULR*, 5 (1958), 26–31.

between workers and the objects produced had also changed as increased consumer power enabled the worker to consume the objects they had made. Whilst Hall acknowledged that owning bourgeois products did not in-itself translate directly into espousing bourgeois values, such patterns of acquisition took on and produced their own distinctive set of values. The objects transformed from their own intrinsic worth into so many potent symbols of social status; a proliferation of lifestyle choices.

This process was reinforced and perpetuated by powerful forces such as mass marketing and a media industry that worked on deep psychological levels to encourage individual expression through consumption, to manufacture desire as much as the objects of desire themselves:

Every form of communication which is concerned with altering attitudes, which changes or confirms opinions, which instils new images of the self, is playing its part. They are not peripheral to the 'economic base', they are part of it.⁸⁸

All these factors, Hall concluded, were acting to sever any sense of common working-class experience, vital to forging a common identity, and to make the worker complicit in their own permanent alienation.

The implications of Hall's argument were that working-class consciousness was shaped not only by physical labour processes but by the images and languages through which value and meaning were inscribed by the skilful manipulations of the mass media. What he suggested was that there were severe limitations in appealing towards 'traditional' forms of working-class solidarity as the critical site of political action. New (or at least thoroughly revised) analytical models and practical strategies for dealing with a highly distinctive form of capitalism were urgently required.

The following edition of the *ULR* (6) carried replies from Thompson and Samuel. Thompson, drawing on his favoured polemical mode, criticised what he saw as a lack of historical context in the making of such an argument. The working class was not, he asserted, a single, homogenous entity moving through time, space and place. The core of class identity was not defined by one particular set of social arrangements or material conditions but in terms of 'a whole way of struggle' which was multifarious and dynamic in nature.

88 Ibid., 31.

Thompson continued, upbraiding the ‘young turks of the *ULR*’ for treating the working class as a manipulated mass and for assuming the position of distant intellectuals peering down at the working class through so many mediating sociological theories. He urged that they rekindle their political commitment and ‘bring to [the working class] hope, a sense of their own strength, and potential life’.⁸⁹ In short, Thompson proposed, it was solidarity and commitment, rather than explanation, which was really needed.

In his reply, ‘Class and Classlessness’, Samuel (clearly, according to Thompson’s formula, an errant ‘young Turk’) advanced a similar line to his former comrade. He questioned the sociological modelling that underpinned Hall’s argument, arguing that it showed a selective, restrictive, view of working-class history.⁹⁰ The working classes, he argued, had always been subject to forces of persuasion, manipulation and the promise of mobility and affluence (where once religion had occupied the main pervasive and instructive role in working-class life, now the mass media assumed a similar one). Furthermore, for all the changes in the nature of work and industry, a brief survey of the personnel in upper echelons of company management (the majority of whom, at this time, still came from wealthy families, were educated at public schools and were graduates from Oxford or Cambridge universities) revealed the continuation of a clear class bias.⁹¹ He concluded his article with the assertion that:

Socialism must start from the existing strengths of working people, from their power to assimilate what is valuable and reject what is false in post-war society ... Socialism is not only ... a society for people – it is also a society that they will create.⁹²

Underpinning this exchange were two different readings of history informing divergent views of what socialism, as a political position, really meant and what the role of the socialist intellectual should be. For Hall, the changes wrought by postwar capitalism implied a break with older forms of economic, political and social life. Such a break meant that the nature of class consciousness was fundamentally different to what it

89 E.P. Thompson, ‘Commitment in Politics’, *ULR*, 6 (1959), 55.

90 Ralph Samuel, ‘Class and Classlessness’, *ULR*, 6 (1959), 44–51.

91 He did, however, acknowledge an alarming trend towards viewing the boss as hero, an idea further developed in Samuel, ‘The Boss as Hero’, *ULR*, 7 (1959), 26–31.

92 Samuel, ‘Class and Classlessness’, 51.

had once been. The role of the contemporary socialist intellectual was, therefore, to identify and analyse these new forms and understand their internal dynamics.

In the eyes of the two former communists, aligned despite the generational divide, the new capitalism was not so distinct from the old.⁹³ Nor had it fundamentally transfigured the deeper structures of working-class culture which had never been a single or homogenous entity. At its core, the two men shared a view of class politics as primarily defined by struggle against oppression and domination. This struggle was not only concerned with acquiring equal conditions of material well-being but with the capacity to realise full emotional and intellectual potential through active participation in social life and decision-making. Both men drew upon history to show both the distinctiveness of this struggle as it manifested at different times in different conditions, but also, simultaneously, to demonstrate the continuity of its nature.

Whilst united in this view, on the role of the socialist intellectual the two men once again differed. In Thompson's vision, the intellectual should offer sustained critique, enduring solidarity and inspiration. For Samuel, this role was rooted even more directly amongst the people, working with them to create their society. In this sense at least, Samuel, whilst not necessarily sharing Williams' larger political or historical vision, *did* follow his call for intellectuals to 'concede the practice of democracy' in the learning process.

The Institute of Community Studies

Samuel's ideas were also reshaped outside of the immediate milieu of the first New Left. In 1958 he took a job as a researcher for the London-based Institute of Community Studies (ICS). The direct experience of 'on the ground' research work, in particular oral interviewing, was valuable in planting the seeds for his future work. At the same time, the institute's use of sociological modelling in service of social policy reinforced his scepticism towards sociology which he saw as reductive, giving an undue authority to the intellectual in determining its shape and meaning.

93 Samuel explored this idea more directly in: 'Bastard Capitalism', in E.P. Thompson, ed., *Out of Apathy* (London: New Left Books, 1960), arguing here for the parallels with what Rodney Hilton, fellow CPHG member and medieval historian, had once termed 'bastard feudalism'.

The ICS was officially established by Michael Young in 1953 as an independent, not-for-profit organisation.⁹⁴ During the Second World War and the immediate postwar years, Young had worked closely with government agencies and the Labour Party on social planning, an experience which left him disillusioned with party politics and in search of a more independent means of combining policy development with relevant research.⁹⁵

Young combined forces with fellow researchers Peter Willmott, sociologist Peter Townsend and former psychology student Peter Marris.⁹⁶ An advisory board was formed, boasting an impressive array of figures from sociology including Richard Titmuss (Young's former doctoral supervisor at the London School of Economics), English sociologist-cum-anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer, American sociologist Edward Shils, and Charles Madge, formerly one of the architects behind the Mass Observation movement.⁹⁷

The ICS set out to undertake original research into postwar social change and to chart the impact of social policies, with particular reference to the effect of these on working-class communities. One of the major features of postwar social planning was the clearance and redevelopment of inner-city slums and the relocation of families to newly built suburban settlements. One such area to be targeted was Bethnal Green in London's East End, a place of enduring fascination to social researchers including Beatrice and Sidney Webb. It was here that Young and Willmott focused the institute's first major study resulting in the publication of *Family and Kinship in East London* (1957).

The study was split into two, the first half concentrating on Bethnal Green, the second on Greenleigh, one of the new suburbs. The bulk of it drew on standard quantitative research methods; teams of researchers carrying out surveys covering a range of issues from family background, occupation and

94 A.H. Halsey, 'Young, Michael Dunlop, Baron Young of Dartington (1915–2002)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

95 Asa Briggs, *Michael Young: Social Entrepreneur* (London: Palgrave Macmillan Ltd, 2001), 110–54.

96 Michael Young, 'Willmott, Peter (1923–2000)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Howard Glennerster, 'Townsend, Peter Brereton (1928–2009)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Peter Townsend, 'Peter Marris', *The Guardian*, 5 July 2007.

97 See James Hinton, *The Mass Observers: A History 1937–1949* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

household income to voting behaviour. What made *Family and Kinship in East London* more distinctive was its use of qualitative data including unstructured, open-ended interviews, which were carried out in person.⁹⁸

As others before them, the two researchers were captivated by Bethnal Green, describing it as: ‘encasing the history of three hundred years’, with its ‘gaunt buildings riding above narrow streets of narrow houses’ where the ‘cottages built for the descendants of Huguenot refugees stand next to Victorian red brick on one side and massive blocks of Edwardian charity on the other’. Streets cluttered with ‘funny fading little pubs’, ‘street barrows piled high with fruit, fish and dresses’ and ‘tiny workshops squeezed into a thousand backyards’.⁹⁹ In this enchanting space of intersecting histories, what struck the researchers was the strength of familial and kinship connections which acted as a crucial means of survival. The book acknowledged the sense of emotional loss experienced by some on leaving for life in the new suburb.¹⁰⁰

Family and Kinship in East London enjoyed a good public reception, even winning critical praise from Amis.¹⁰¹ As a text it stood at a point of juncture. In part, it resumed an older English tradition of empirically informed social observation, as practised by figures like the Webbs.¹⁰² At the same time, it reflected the growing popularity of social science writing and of sociology as the intellectual *mode de la jour*.¹⁰³ Either way, it introduced the institute as a dynamic force in British social research.¹⁰⁴ Further projects and books followed, including the ones that Samuel was employed as a researcher to work on.

98 Michael Young and Peter Willmott, ‘Introduction’, in *Family and Kinship in East London* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), 4. See also Peter Marris, ‘Knowledge and Persuasion: Research at the ICS’, in Geoff Dench, Tony Flower and Kate Gavron, eds, *Young at Eighty: The Prolific Public Life of Michael Young* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1995), 75.

99 *Ibid.*, 97–98.

100 Whilst *Family and Kinship in East London* is often criticised for presenting a ‘romantic’ view of working-class community life and an overly negative view of the new suburbs, passages in the book did recognise the positive qualities offered by life in the new suburbs. Young and Willmott, *Family and Kinship*, 148.

101 Kingsley Amis, ‘I Don’t Like to be Old’, *The Spectator*, 28 March 1958, 22.

102 This interpretation is posed in: Asa Briggs, ‘Michael Young: The Last Victorian’, in Briggs, *Michael Young*, 329–31.

103 Also suggested by the spread of sociology departments and research centres across British universities.

104 Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good*, 182.

Samuel joined the institute following a talk by Willmott on ‘The New London’, given at the Soho branch of the New Left Club in late 1958. At first he responded to the research ethos and practices of the institute with enthusiasm (after this point he ceased to be listed as the New Left Club chairman, demonstrating the extent to which his energies were occupied with this new project).¹⁰⁵ It brought him back to the home of his maternal family, a place whose many histories were inscribed upon its streets.¹⁰⁶ In the early 1960s, Samuel, along with Marris, his colleague and close friend, acquired 19 Elder Street, Spitalfields, a modest terrace house in what had once been an eighteenth-century slum. This remained his home for the rest of his life.¹⁰⁷

Along with his natural affinity with East London, the ICS’s emphasis on oral interviews was attractive as they brought him into close contact with people whose lives were far removed from Oxford student life, or radical left-wing intellectualism. This work was mentally and emotionally tough but also exciting. Initially his role at the institute was as an interviewer working on the ‘New Towns’, another postwar initiative intended to relieve pressure on the inner cities and improve quality of life by creating purpose-built, self-contained settlements.

He first worked on Stevenage, which, despite opposition from the residents, became Britain’s first New Town (under the *New Towns Act, 1946*). Six new neighbourhoods had been planned, four of which had been completed by 1953.¹⁰⁸ It was in these neighbourhoods that interviewers like Samuel were despatched, armed with in-depth questionnaires covering a range of issues such as household composition, distribution of roles within the household, occupations, political views and voting behaviours.¹⁰⁹

105 Brian Harrison, ‘Interview with Raphael Samuel’, 23 October 1979, 19 Elder Street, London, transcripts held in Raphael Samuel Archive (RSA), Bishopsgate Institute, London; Brian Harrison, ‘Interview with Raphael Samuel’, 18 September 1987.

106 Alex May, ‘Keal, Minna (1909–1999)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

107 Douglas Blain, ‘Raphael Samuel’, *The Spitalfields Trust Newsletter*, December 1996.

108 David Kynaston, *Modernity Britain: Opening the Box 1957–59* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 129.

109 Ralph Samuel, ‘Stevenage Surveys and Notes’, RS 1: New Left/ Institute of Community Studies, 301, 304, 306, RSA.

For the social researchers at the institute, the New Towns were a fascinating barometer of social change. They provided a unique insight into so-called working-class affluence. They also constituted rich case studies in community formation as individual family units began to inhabit the new purpose-built neighbourhoods and forge relationships amongst themselves, comparatively freer of the ties of necessity and tradition. What the researchers set out to discern was the impact of these changes on social identities. Samuel showed particular zeal for this project, conducting up to nine of these intensive questionnaire-interviews in one week.¹¹⁰

Another ICS project that he was involved with looked at adolescent boys in Bethnal Green. This project responded directly to a 1950s discourse on youth culture that, as argued by Dick Hebdige, oscillated between a celebration of teenage consumption as an economic driving force and concern for the paucity and violence of youth culture.¹¹¹ The project, officially headed by Willmott, started in 1959 and the research initially took the form of open-ended interviews; the fruit of cultivating close relationships with the study's subjects and the development of networks of connections. Later the boys were encouraged to keep personal diaries documenting their experiences and feelings.¹¹²

He carried out a huge quantity of research on this project, forging relationships with the interview subjects over a protracted period of time, coming to know the boys in question, winning their confidence and trust in order to encourage them to reveal more about the nature of their lives. Questions and topics ranged widely – from the boys' experiences of education and the workplace, to the intimate topographies of their social worlds, hopes, fears and dreams.¹¹³

110 *Ibid.*, 301.

111 See Dick Hebdige, 'Hiding in the Light: Youth Surveillance and Display' and 'Towards a Cartography of Taste, 1935–1962', in *Hiding in the Light: On Images and Things* (Routledge: London 1988), 17–36, 45–76; Geoffrey Pearson, 'Falling Standards: A Short, Sharp History of Moral Decline', in Martin Barker, ed., *The Video Nasties: Freedom and Censorship in the Media* (London: The Works, 1984), 88–103.

112 Peter Willmott, 'Introduction', in *Adolescent Boys of East London* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1966), 6.

113 Ralph Samuel, 'Bethnal Green Youth Survey Interviews 1957–1962', RS 1: New Left/ Institute of Community Studies, 308, RSA.

His research notes from the project show the extent to which he utilised this form of close observation, immersion and empathy in attempting to understand both the personal dimensions of male adolescence, but also the ways in which those experiences were mediated by wider social contexts such as class, family and community relationships. A typical comment from his observations noted sympathetically ‘wildness not roughness’.¹¹⁴ He would later say that the research into juvenile delinquency had not been a good thing for him to be doing, perhaps referring to the turbulence of his own feelings at this time.¹¹⁵

The enthusiasm that he had initially felt at the institute’s working methods and techniques soon gave way to some scepticism and critique. Some hint of this can be seen from the final published study, *Adolescent Boys of East London* (1966). Willmott’s introduction to the study explained that whilst the project had begun heavily based in qualitative research, after five years (1964) it had become apparent that more quantitative data was required: ‘at this stage, therefore, we had a good deal of impressionistic and illustrative material, but almost nothing in the way of statistical information’, which had been conducted via formal questionnaire surveys carried out on a sample of 246 young men.¹¹⁶

The appendices at the back of the book give further insight into the nature of this second research phase. Appendix Four, for example, revealed how the responses of subjects to the questions posed were used to ‘classify’ them into social types. When asked their opinion concerning ‘the reasonableness of rules’ (no further context provided for the term rules), a ‘middle class or working class’ boy was expected to reply in the affirmative; that all, most or about half of rules were reasonable. A ‘rebel’, on the other hand, was expected to reply in the negative, feeling all or most rules to be unreasonable.¹¹⁷ Subsequent pages detailed further the scales of social class or rebelliousness used by the researchers, revealing how factors including schooling, exams, work location, occupational class, friendship group, marital expectations and financial habits were used to determine a more precise definition of social class and attitudes.¹¹⁸

114 Ralph Samuel, ‘Notes towards draft report’, RS 1: New Left/ Institute of Community Studies, 309, RSA.

115 Brian Harrison, ‘Interview with Raphael Samuel’, 23 October 1979.

116 Willmott, ‘Introduction’, in *Adolescent Boys*, 14–20.

117 Willmott, ‘Appendix Four’, in *Adolescent Boys*, 212.

118 *Ibid.*, 216.

The schematic nature of this approach stood at sharp variance with the unstructured, explorative and deeply personal nature of the interviews and relationships first cultivated by Samuel who, as Willmott acknowledged, had 'carried the main burden of the research' in its initial stages but had not been involved in the later stages, due to his taking up a teaching position at Ruskin College in 1962.¹¹⁹ As the institute became more established as a research centre, the subjective, at times anecdotal, approach which had animated the pages of *Family and Kinship* came increasingly under pressure to become more 'rigorous' and scientific in order to be 'of use' in policy decisions.¹²⁰

This was something that Samuel found unsatisfying, feeling that it lacked a wider sense of history or deeper understanding of human life.¹²¹ He prepared a substantial collection of notes for Willmott, urging against too simplistic a view of working-class history:

The image of the new 'open' society of the post-war world gains a deceptive strength from the comparison with the nineteenth century. Nineteenth century W.class – it is suggested – was depressed and immobile. The w.class way of life – from its formal institutions such as the Trades Unions to the informal solidarity of the streets, the Pub and the Club – was built up as a protection against the barbarism of the I.Revolution and the production system which treated men as things. I think this is partly true but there were other pressures too, in the society, which militated against the formation of W.C. community but which were overcome.¹²²

Not only was he critical of the assumptions implied by sociological models, he was also uncomfortable about the uses of social research for policy decisions. Treating people by aggregates, as social entities to be arranged and positioned, gave to the sociologist a distance and authority over the subjects that he was uneasy with. In a draft report on the adolescent boys research, he put the case as follows:

My conclusion is concerned not to make recommendation, but rather to underline the extreme limits of this kind of study. If it has any use it is rather to correct, to suggest how little we know ... It seems to me

119 Willmott, 'Introduction', in *Adolescent Boys*, 6.

120 An internal 'philosophical debate' on the aim of the institute and nature of its research was prompted by Townsend, whose sociological training had been more formal than that of Young or even Willmott, as early as 1956. See Briggs, *Michael Young*, 146.

121 Brian Harrison, 'Interview with Raphael Samuel', 23 October 1979.

122 Ralph Samuel to Peter Willmott, 'Notes on Nineteenth Century Working Class', RS 1: New Left/Institute of Community Studies, correspondence 1957–1962, 308, RSA.

the sociologist's role should be altogether more modest, and should be confined in the main to social enquiry, to finding out the facts that are readily available and without much change. Once you begin to quantify you assume a comparable weight and importance to opinions; and this you cannot do.¹²³

In the same way that he had rejected a privileged role for the 'socialist intellectual', he also rejected the idea of the sociologist's authority to determine social policy based on their research.

Characteristically proactive, he set about undertaking his own research project into issues relating to working-class life and class consciousness. Recruiting youthful members of the London branch of the New Left Club to help him, he undertook his own studies of class and political consciousness in Bethnal Green.¹²⁴ His questionnaires relied upon qualitative interviewing techniques in which the interviewee was given free rein.¹²⁵

The ICS was an important influence for Samuel. Firstly, the emphasis placed on the researcher being 'in the field', engaging with people as they found them, can certainly be seen translated into his later oral histories. Secondly, it reinforced in him a wariness of sociological modelling and the dangers of presenting an overly homogenised view of the working class, drawing on restrictive assumptions of history and leading to an overly emphatic assertion of the changes brought about by increased working-class affluence.

It also underlined his dislike of the authority that the sociologist assumed when constructing data for political purposes. A new society, he insisted, could not be imposed from above, built on the findings of selective sociological research, insensitive to difference and nuance. It had to be one that working-class people were active participants in the making of.

123 Ralph Samuel, 'Notes towards Bethnal Green Youth Survey', RS 1: New Left/Institute of Community Studies, Bethnal Green Youth Survey draft report, 309, RSA. He expanded on his critique of sociology in a draft article: Ralph Samuel, 'The Vanity of Measurements (c.1961)', RS 1: New Left/Institute of Community Studies, 1959–1960, 302, RSA. For further discussion on these issues see: Jon Lawrence, 'Social-Science Encounters and the Negotiation of Difference in 1960s England', *HWJ*, 77 (2014), 215–39. Lawrence discusses the social research interview in terms of 'performance'. He examines how the researchers' cultural backgrounds and the assumptions made about working class and affluence influenced their role of the 'performance', in turn impacting upon that of the interview subjects.

124 Robin Blackburn, 'Raphael Samuel: The Politics of Thick Description', *NLR*, 1/221, Jan–Feb (1997), 133–38. Robin Blackburn would later become the editor of the *NLR* (1981–99).

125 *Ibid.*

Socialism: A way of thinking about people?

In 1959, troubled by financial pressures, the *ULR* and the *NR* combined to form the *New Left Review* (*NLR*) which was intended to consolidate and continue on with the New Left project. Far from allaying the tensions, the merge exacerbated them. From the outset there was conflict over the choice of editor. Thompson seemed the obvious choice, but he was unwilling.¹²⁶ In the end, Hall took on the role, despite his relative youth and inexperience with the complexities of the English labour movement. He quickly found himself in an impossible position, under pressure from all sides. Some called for him to use the journal as the basis to develop a more concerted political infrastructure of the New Left movement whilst others were equally passionate in their opposition to this proposition.¹²⁷

Despite the pressures attendant on its young editor, the journal made its debut appearance early in 1960. The first edition, appearing in the wake of the Labour Party's third successive electoral defeat in the 1959 election, addressed itself largely to the questions posed by the party's unpopularity. Whilst several of the contributors concentrated on the official institutions of the labour movement and the party itself, Samuel considered the question from the ground, confronting directly that perplexing phenomenon of the working-class Tory voter and asking why a substantial proportion of the working class voted Conservative.¹²⁸ The Labour Party's own review of the election had offered one answer: 'we were defeated by prosperity: this was without doubt the prominent factor'.¹²⁹ Samuel, however, proposed another.

Drawing on material garnered through his interviewing work in Stevenage, he based his investigation on a close reading of direct quotations from his subjects. From these he gleaned two key insights. Firstly, that the working-class Tory voter was not necessarily a middle-class aspirant. Many (the majority in his findings) voted as self-identified members of the working class, expressing this through comments such as: 'The Conservative Party is the gentleman's party. They're the people who have

126 Samuel was also considered to be a good choice but the chaos that generally accompanied his endeavours placed him out of contention. Stuart Hall, oral communication with author, May 2012.

127 Ibid.

128 Ralph Miliband, 'The Sickness of Labourism', *NLR*, I/1, Jan–Feb (1960), 5–9; Mervyn Jones, 'The Man from Labour', *NLR*, I/1, Jan–Feb (1960), 14–17.

129 Quoted in Kevin Jeffreys, *Retreat from New Jerusalem: British Politics 1951–64* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1997), 82.

got the money. I always vote for them. I am only a working man and they're my guv'nors'; or 'They have done a lot for the working people. A few years ago I would have said that they stood for themselves – making money and getting rich. But now they're certainly looking out for us'.¹³⁰

Secondly, and related to the first insight, he suggested that far from a sense of contemporary affluence, the crucial factor was a sense *of the past*: 'The Conservatives have had more experience over the centuries. It's in the blood for them, running the country'.¹³¹

He concluded his article by appealing to Labour, and to socialists in general, to take more seriously this prevailing view of British history, and (much as Dimitrov had done 25 years earlier) pressed the need for 'an equally imposing alternative presence to that of the governing class, with an equally compelling, but socialist view of the way this country can live'.¹³²

A second article, appearing later that year, reiterated his critique of sociological methodology. In this instance, his target was market researcher and sociologist Mark Abrams, the author of a series of articles, 'Why Labour Has Lost Elections?'¹³³ Based on the results of his 'comprehensive' surveying, Abrams argued that just as working-class homes were being transformed by material goods, so even manual workers were turning into middle-class conservatives. Young people in particular, he contended, were likely to identify with the Conservatives who they felt represented 'skilled craftsmen, middle-class people, forward-looking people, ambitious people, office workers and scientists'.¹³⁴ Since prosperity was expected to last well into the sixties, Labour, it seemed, had no choice but to reinvent itself for the age of affluence or be condemned to political oblivion.

130 Ralph Samuel, 'The Deference Voter', *NLR*, I/1, Jan–Feb (1960), 9–13.

131 *Ibid.*, 13

132 *Ibid.*

133 The articles were initially run across four editions of *Socialist Commentary*. They later appeared as a book: Mark Abrams and Richard Rose, *Must Labour Lose?* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961). The book is the source reference used here.

134 Abrams and Rose, *Must Labour Lose?*, 42–43.

His reply, 'Dr Abrams and the End of Politics', took pride of place as the lead article (it was his longest piece of published political writing). It differed from the style of his previous contributions in its open anger.¹³⁵ Abrams's survey, he fumed:

does not tell us anything new about the reasons for Labour's defeat, nor does a close reading support its claim to offer a 'reliable understanding of contemporary British political loyalties.' Its importance lies rather in the underlying approach to man and politics it reveals and which, in turn, it supports.¹³⁶

He proceeded to unveil the sociologist's 'box of tricks' (drawing here on his first-hand experiences with the institute), exposing the unseen processes behind the selection of samples and the framing of questions:

Dr Abrams is probably right to suggest that had he used a much larger sample his results would not have been very different. It is not only his remarkable dexterity in handling statistics which makes one suspect that, whatever they had shown his conclusions would hardly have altered. It is also that many of the 'answers' were plainly determined by the questions themselves.¹³⁷

Not only this, he contended, but the application of sociological formula and models to those answers also reconfigured their original meanings:

Ted and Mods, Beatniks and Ravers, Aldermaston Marchers and Nuclear Campaigns, they all disappear amidst the whirrings of his Hollerith Machines, to reemerge, on his Punch Cards, an almost undifferentiated mass whose principal 'identification' is with 'middle class progressive optimists.'(!)¹³⁸

What Abrams claimed to be a general trend or pattern was, Samuel proposed, little more than a carefully constructed *appearance* of one.

135 Ralph Samuel, 'Dr Abrams and the End of Politics', *NLR*, I/5, Sep–Oct (1960), 1–8. So striking is the difference from the general tone of his earlier pieces, I have found it worth quoting at some length.

136 *Ibid.*, 1.

137 *Ibid.*, 5.

138 *Ibid.*, 4.

His concluding remarks set out his own perspective with clarity:

If the Labour Movement were finally to abandon its traditional way of thinking about people – and that alone is truly fundamental – to lose its faith in the power of the word to move people, and of the idea to change them, if it were to let go its conviction in the capacity of human beings rationally to choose between the alternatives which face them, and purposefully to re-shape the society in which they live, then it would be finished and would find itself trapped in that limbo of the political imagination whose features Dr Abrams has so meticulously outlined.¹³⁹

Whether or not labour history could fully bear out the claim of a ‘traditional way of thinking about people’ (his later investigations in this area would suggest it could not), the sentiment reveals the nature of Samuel’s socialism as an ethical position animated by a faith in people as creative actors and ideas as active agents of change (Abrams might have smiled at this, and promptly filed its author under ‘middle-class progressive optimist’).

Quite likely the spirited anger of the ‘End of Politics’ article was provoked by more than just Abrams’s dismal view of human nature. Even as the fledgling *NLR* proclaimed a continuation and revitalisation of New Left discussion, the New Left, as a movement, was losing momentum. Membership of the clubs dwindled; the impetus provided by the relationship with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament began to subside as fears of the immediate threat of nuclear warfare were abated.

In 1961 internal tensions grew too great for Hall and he resigned as editor. Samuel took control of editing the journal for one edition. This arrived very late, far too big but extremely impressive, covering a range of issues including: a thorough examination of social housing; discussions on film and literature; and, of course, a reprinting of an old classic, ‘On the Puritan Character’, an excerpt from Tawney’s *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (1926).¹⁴⁰ It was, however, to be the last journal produced by those ostensibly from the first New Left group. In 1963 the young

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁴⁰ *NLR*, Jan–Apr (1962). The *NLR* is usually published bimonthly, *not* quarterly. R.H. Tawney was a personal hero and Tawney’s *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* an old favourite from his youthful history reading. Brian Harrison, ‘Interview with Raphael Samuel’, 18 September 1987.

historian and Marxist political theorist Perry Anderson assumed full editorship (in circumstances that Thompson would later describe darkly in terms of a hostile take-over), quickly asserting his intention to take the journal in a more explicitly theoretical direction.¹⁴¹

Samuel, weary of the interminable disputes that preoccupied the New Left and appalled by the Labour Party's pursuit of modernisation, removed himself to Ireland (which he considered to be the least afflicted by modernisation), where he attempted to write history and poetry but mostly, due to an inability to find work, starved.¹⁴² During this time, worn down by frustration, disenchantment and hunger, he suffered from a severe depressive episode.

For Samuel the period of the first New Left was a bewildering time in his life, but this trauma had not been entirely inhibitive. It provided him with a critical and creative basis upon which to lay the foundation stones for his later ideas and practices of history. His reaction to the breakdown of his commitment to the CPGB was complex. It did not constitute a complete break from the values of communism, but at the same time he came to recognise and reject the authoritarianism inherent in Stalinist versions of Marxist thought. This hostility towards political authoritarianism, in all its guises, was reflected in the force of his reaction against quantitative sociology and his increasing insistence on human agency.

It was also during this time that the real core of his political project was given a more conscious form of expression: a form of direct democracy, realised via a common participatory culture, created by people, guided and assisted, but not *instructed*, by intellectuals. For Samuel, such a role for the socialist intellectual did not generally involve dense pages of philosophical or moral debate in a journal; it was always focused around practical enterprises or initiatives to create spaces in which to extend and expand political conversation. The *ULR*, the Partisan Café and the New Left clubs were some examples of his attempts to create this sort of space. The HW would be another.

141 E.P. Thompson, 'The Peculiarities of the English', *The Socialist Register*, 2 (1965); Perry Anderson, 'Components of the National Culture', *NLR*, 1/50, Jul–Aug (1968), 3–57.

142 Hall, 'Raphael Samuel: 1934–1996'; Brian Harrison, 'Interview with Raphael Samuel', 23 October 1979.