

Setting the stage: performing politics in *Theatres of Memory*

Introduction

British historian Raphael Samuel, a former communist turned founder figure of the first British New Left (1956-1962), is best known as the organising force behind the early History Workshop (HW) movement (1963-1979) which emerged out of Ruskin Collegeⁱ where Samuel worked as a tutor. The Workshop took its stance on the democratisation of history making, seeking to empower Ruskin's working-class students to become producers of their own history (Samuel, 1975; Scott-Brown, 2016). It did by starting from the position of the student, privileging their existing interests and experience. Not only did this demystify the research process for students, it allowed them to interrogate silences and omissions within dominant historical narratives (Kean, 2004). Driving this process, Samuel, once the 'poster-boy' for the New Left's activist-politics (Davis, 2013), now assumed the role of the 'people's historian' (Wright, 1985; Scott-Brown 2017b).

Whilst studies have acknowledged the Workshop's radical pedagogy, and Samuel's role as an educator within this (Kean, 2004; Gentry, 2013; Scott-Brown, 2016), there has been less focus on how his writing of history also enacted this distinctive politics. This paper examines Samuel's *Theatres of Memory (Theatres)* (1994), the only sole-authored monograph to be published during his life time and his most sustained engagement on popular memory in contemporary Britain. I argue here that *Theatres*, like the Workshop, offered a performative vehicle for his practice-led socialism and its associated pedagogical practice. I further contend that despite its defence of popular history making, its target audience was not only a general readership, but fellow left-wing intellectuals and professional historians, many of whom were critical of Samuel and the Workshop's approach to history making. I suggest that *Theatres* is

best read as a performative polemic which had first to negotiate conceptual and ideological space amongst both the left-wing and academic discourses to which it was responding.

In *The Drama of Social Life* (2017), Jeffrey Alexander argued:

Intellectuals play important social roles in so far as: (1) their ideas provide poetically potent scripts; (2) the scripts not only read well but have the potential to walk and talk, thus contributing to the staging of social dramas; (3) the enacted scripts so affect the meanings and motivations of audiences that social actors are motivated to participate in social movements and build new institutions (106).

He continued: 'Powerful intellectuals create symbolic frameworks that re-fuse fragmented meanings, actions and institutions.' (107)

Alexander's acknowledgment of the performative nature of successful 'scripts' in the creation of socio-political dramas that audiences both identify with and wish to participate in has some purchase in understanding *Theatres* as a politicised text. Samuel, however, complicates matters. The centrality of participation to his political thought required that the 'script' he provided had to de-centralise any one grand narrative and de-privilege his role as an intellectual. Of course, there was a degree of contrivance here, Samuel was, or certainly became, a compelling and forceful figure in the first New Left and Workshop movement, as Sheila Rowbotham, a former Workshopper, recalled:

Raphael was not simply a writer but a renowned organiser, the kind who was an initiator of great projects with the capacity to yoke his fellow to the concept and carry them on regardless of grizzles and groans [...] He was the world's most adept hooker and ruthless beneath the charm (1997)

Nevertheless, a grand narrative of pluralism and active participation could only be authentic to its own professed principles if it did not *appear* to be a grand narrative written by a single author.

One cannot, then, treat *Theatres* as a straight forward piece of polemical writing, explicitly seeking to persuade an audience to a defined point of view. Rather its persuasive power was realised in the extent to which it not only called for a participatory approach to history making but stimulated one amongst its readers. A useful idea to think with here is Roland Barthes' distinction between the 'readerly' and the 'writerly' text (1974). The readerly text situates the reader in a passive position by presenting a realised image that they can either choose to accept or reject, whereas the writerly text, through its challenging structure and unexpected use of language, forces the reader into having to make meaning actively, placing them in the position of co-writer.

In exploring *Theatres* as a 'writerly', 'performative' text, I first situate the book in relation to the debates that shaped the New Left and the emergence of cultural Marxism in post-war Britain. I consider how reactions to it, both negative and positive, revealed much about the book's external and internal politics. I then turn to a close reading of the book, drawing on a critical performative analysis to highlight its dynamics of action and (re)framing of power.

Context and Reactions

In an obituary of Samuel written in 1996, his long-term friend Stuart Hall wrote of *Theatres*:

Of course, in one sense he had been preparing to write such a book ever since he first recognised the social history of working-class life as his true vocation in the early 1960s. In another sense, the book [...] was the product of a kind of expansion of sympathies, an opening up of himself to the 'play' of the

sheer abundant, tumultuous variety of the popular, of which the early Raphael would not have been capable (1997).

Whilst Hall was right to suggest that *Theatres* reflected Samuel's professional trajectory as a social historian, its roots lay further back in the political and epistemological debates that erupted amongst the intellectual left from the late 1950s, first expressed amongst members of the first British New Left (1956-1962).

The New Left emerged in 1956, following the Khrushchev revelations which saw many British communists, including Samuel, leave the British branch of the party in search of a 'new' socialism, sensitive to the rapid social and cultural changes which were re-shaping late 1950s Britain (Chun, 1993; Kenny, 1995; Thompson, 1996; Dworkin, 1997; Matthews, 2013). Whilst the New Left was far too diffuse to speak of in terms of an organised political body or even a shared political vision, much early discussion was focused around two journals, *The New Reasoner* (NR) (1956-9), edited by EP Thompson and John Saville and *Universities and Left Review* (ULR) (1956-9), edited by Samuel, Hall, Charles Taylor and Gabriel Pearson. These later merged to become *The New Left Review* (1960-).

As Madeleine Davis has argued, a prominent strand in New Left political thought was the invocation of an activist politics, particularly focused around the ULR and its young editors, which emphasised popular participation and direct action (2013, 57-81). In many respects, Samuel, a former communist organiser, was the chief architect of these forms of organisation. Often working behind the scenes, he instigated the journal and was influential in determining its overall tone, style and format; he was the chairman of the New Left clubs and various associated discussion groups; he was also the instigator of the ill-fated partisan café, a well-intentioned but ultimately doomed attempt to engineer a new form of inclusive political space

(Scott-Brown, 2017b, 55-75). During this time, he also undertook an early foray into working class oral history (Samuel, 1960).

In 1963, Perry Anderson assumed editorial control of the NLR and chose to turn the journal towards a more rigorous theoretical orientation (Anderson, 1965). Deeply unhappy with this turn of events, Samuel departed for Ruskin College, founded as a workers' college in 1899, where he resumed his activism, this time channelling it into history through the development of the HW movement. After modest beginnings, largely localised amongst Ruskin students, it grew steadily reaching extraordinary proportions by the late 1970s.

Deliberately setting out to subvert what Samuel considered to be the restrictive content and form of Ruskin's Special Diploma history curricula, the design of Workshop events was intended to enact its radical politics of participation and inclusivity. Against 'academic objectivity' meetings were partisan, with politics and history openly entwined. Against 'scholarly severity', they were jubilant occasions with a festive, carnival atmosphere, often including music or theatre. Ruskin students and academics combined forces in pioneering projects exploring the social and cultural histories of everyday life, often drawing on oral and material sources to supplement, or subvert, the documentary record.

By the late 1970s, formerly creative tensions between the activist and the more academically orientated strands of the Workshop turned increasingly destructive (Popular Memory Group, 1982, 216; Schwarz, 2002, 202-220). The Workshop had already faced criticism from fellow Ruskin tutor David Selbourne for the 'naïve empiricism' of its detailed studies of working-class life and culture (1980), and from Samuel's former New Left colleague E.P. Thompson for 'evacuating large areas of established history' (Samuel, xix, 1975).

For many amongst the intellectual left, the Workshop's attachment to populism lacked the theorisation necessary to advance a more substantive social critique. This view was exemplified

by Richard Johnson, a Workshop fellow-traveller and member of the Centre for Contemporary Culture Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham, who set out what he saw as the progressive unfolding of cultural Marxism in post-war Britain (Johnson, 1978; 2007). The process began, he argued, with a version of social history that revealed the ‘hidden experiences of subordinated groups or classes’, neglected from the historical record. This was where he located the Workshop (and *Theatres*) (762). But whereas, in Johnson’s view, many amongst the early Workshop contingent retained this focus, others, especially those clustered around the CCCS, moved in a more theoretical direction.

Influenced by readings from Antonio Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* (1971) and Louis Althusser’s *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus* (1971) and, later, by Michel Foucault’s notion of genealogy (1980, 139-164; Weeks, 1982), history became a tool for exposing (and disrupting) the hegemonic structures through which individual subjectivities were both constituted and, in turn, subjugated (Johnson, 2007, 761-773). This, in turn, provided a basis from which to interrogate historical consciousness as an ideologically loaded discursive practice.

In contrast with the theoretical sophistication of the CCCS, the Workshop appeared to progress no further than the ‘early’ stages of Johnson’s schematic process (see also Kaye, 1984). Samuel, however, rejected this depiction. In unpublished notes written in the mid-1980s, he argued:

The Marxist history that emerges from the Birmingham Centre for Contempt Studies – a hot house of theory – self consciously trying to naturalise French Marxist structuralism, will necessarily be very different from the one that emanates from the kitchens of Spitalfields and L. Pimlico and the terraces of World’s End and Wolwroth the characteristic habitats of the History Workshop Collective.

(Samuel, SAMUEL/British Marxist Historians/RSA)

The poetics of this passage are revealing. The Marxism of the CCCS is framed as artificial, in thrall to an elite French intellectual culture, which required ‘naturalisation’ in a ‘hot house’, protected from the wider world, to engineer the conditions for its survival and perpetuation. By contrast, the Marxism of the Workshop is cast as domesticated, emerging organically from people’s everyday lives.

Tensions around the uses and politics of theory reached a head in an uncomfortable HW in December 1979 (Samuel, 1981). From this point onwards the Workshop, in an echo of the earlier breakdown of the first New Left, ceased to be based at Ruskin College. Undeterred, Samuel reinvented himself again, turning his attention to the increasingly flourishing heritage industry. Whilst left wing colleagues and professional historians viewed the proliferation of museums, history-themed film, television programmes, consumer products, and tourist activities with horror, as evidence of the triumph of a neo-liberal consumer economy (Wright, 1985; Hewison, 1983), Samuel interpreted these as signs of a robust interest and range of participation in history making amongst the British public, the sort of starting point that the former organiser and experienced teacher could turn to his advantage. He also perceived an important message to the political left, a need to change their attitude towards popular forms of history or risk alienation from a grassroots movement. This provided the basis for *Theatres*.

As with his earlier activities, the book divided opinion. Some greeted it with rapture, Fiona McCarthy praised its humanity and creativity seeing Samuel as the inheritor of a long tradition of people’s history (1995). Historian Jonathan Clark, often considered as sympathetic to the political right, was equally impressed by its critical stance towards the traditional political left (1995). Others, including several academic historians, tempered appreciation with caution. Keith Thomas offered praise whilst also noting the book’s eccentricities (1995). Writing a few years later, literary critic Stefan Collini wrote of his concern that Samuel’s rejection of a

privileged role for the trained historian placed a restriction on his (Samuel's) capacity to make effective social criticism (1999). A few critics saw little to praise in *Theatres*. Historian Patrick Wright, a former member of the CCCS, saw it as a vain attempt on behalf of its author to play the role of the 'people's historian' (Wright, 1995). Hoggart disliked what he perceived as the book's relativist position, the product, he felt, of a confused Marxist acting out his quarrels (Hoggart, 1995).

Was *Theatres* the work of a lively mind or an unfocused one? Like the New Left and the Workshop, many of Samuel's sternest critics were from amongst 'his own' on the left. Battle weary from successive years of Conservative government, and what they perceived as the relentless commodification of the British past in its service, *Theatres* refusal to advance a clear critique was, for many, a weakness. For professional historians the book had much to recommend it but showed a lack of discipline unworthy of a man known to have a highly developed intelligence. But for others, many from disciplines outside of history (such as the creative arts or education), lack of clarity was creativity, a welcome relief from the leftist epistemological debates or the dryness of the traditional academic texts.

Samuel's work, across all its guises since the 1950s, reflected an attempt to shift from describing the conditions of democracy to 'conceding the practice' of it (Williams, 1958, 341). As a historian and educator his interests lay in *who* made history and he resumed the role of the organiser seeking opportunities to stimulate participation in history-making rather than 'conversion' to a single historical interpretation. *Theatres* was no exception. From the outset it declared itself an 'open text, one which can be read by different readers in different ways and used for different purposes' (x).

Before turning to how this project was realised technically, it is worth addressing briefly the question of authorial intent. Samuel may have described *Theatres* as an 'open text' but his

preparatory notes for the book betrayed no clear definition of what this meant to him or how it should be achieved (Samuel, *SAMUEL/Theatres of Memory*, RSA).ⁱⁱ In one respect, this lack of an overarching planning document is a further example of his ethics of practice, always opposed to the idea of a master blueprint. Moreover, if his notes do not outline his thinking processes, they demonstrate them. References or facts, often only a few lines long, were written on single sheets of loose paper. Other pages contained draft paragraphs, experiments in linking these ‘atoms’ together (Light, 1998, xvi; Thomas, 2010, 7-8). Using this generative approach, ideas were built up through the accruing and connecting of facts or experiences in relation to one another. One fact could, then, be arranged in different ways, contributing, simultaneously, to multiple points or observations.

Furthermore, Samuel’s self-styled identity as a socialist-activist provided moral constraints on his intellectual work. Historian Alison Light, Samuel’s widow, later described how:

Writing did not always come first: Raphael’s Communist unconscious, as we used to call it, still mistrusted the identity of the ‘writer’, with its overtones of solipsism and self-importance; it held no glamour for him. Every piece had to be collaborative and sociable as the strict and lonely discipline of writing would allow [...] (1998, xvi)

This account corroborates the view that whether the result of deliberate design or unconscious inclination, *Theatres* was steeped in and inseparable from its author’s idiosyncratic political thought and commitments.ⁱⁱⁱ

Structure: The mise-en-scene

Theatres’ first move was to establish participation as its core value and guiding principle. It did this from the start in the preface, setting the tone for what was about to unfold: ‘It is the argument of *Theatres of Memory* [...] that memory, so far from being merely a passive

receptacle or storage system, an image bank of the past is rather an active, shaping force' (Samuel, 1994, ix-x). The frank acknowledgement of the presence of memory and the implied denial of access to an unmediated past was unexceptional, perfectly in keeping with the various available strains of Marxist cultural theory, but from this point it diverged:

without wanting to claim too much for these volumes, or force a unity which they do not have, it seems worth pointing out that the essays return again and again to the idea of history as an organic form of knowledge, and one whose sources are promiscuous [...] (x)

The use of the term 'promiscuous' conjured a sense of anarchic, unbridled fecundity, contingent, dynamic and opportunist, wriggling free of the conceptual boundaries implied by terms such as 'hegemony', 'discourse' or 'narrative'. 'Organic', with its earthbound connotations, posed a silent opposition to the lack of substance implied by theoretical abstraction.

Building on this, a noticeable silence in the preface (or equally the later introduction) were the book's theoretical orientations. Instead, there was a potted historical survey (such brevity was unusual for its author) of memory's significance in ancient Greece and Rome, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance through to Romanticism. Moving to the twentieth century, but only just, Maurice Halbwachs' antinomian formulation of memory as 'instinctive and primitive' against history, 'the product of analysis reflection' (x; Halbwachs, [1950] 1992) was used to engineer the book's departure point, a refutation and collapse of this distinction. But, in making this case, he did not reference more recent work on collective memory by fellow Frenchman Pierre Nora. Nor did he situate the work in relation to any of the theorists proving influential for the emerging fields of critical memory studies and historical consciousness (for example, Gramsci,

1975; Benjamin, 2015; Foucault, 1980; de Certeau, 1984; Derrida, 1984; Haug, 1988). The CCCS's popular memory group also went unacknowledged (Popular Memory Group, 1982).

This was unsurprising given the hostility he had previously expressed towards the CCCS. Less explicable was the lack of engagement with 'home-grown' studies, much of which came from groups and individuals close to the workshop. The Communist Party Historians' Group's interest in 'social psychology' was not cited, nor the pioneering work on oral history by Paul Thompson and others close to the *Oral History Journal* (which included the author) (Schwarz, 1982; Samuel 1971; Thompson, 1978; Passerini, 1988). Strangest of all was the omission of Workshop-initiated projects dealing with oral memory (see for example, McKenna, 1970; Douglass, 1974; Samuel, 1975; Harding and Samuel 1980).

There is little doubt that Samuel was familiar with the wider theoretical literature and had participated in the various debates (Samuel, 1980; 1991; 1992). Why, then, omit it? An earlier comment in his editorial for the HW collection *Patriotism* (1984) illuminates this omission of theoretical analysis. Describing the collection's primary aim as an 'escape from unitary or essentialist notions of all kinds', he included in this 'Gramscian notions of hegemony (that currently fashionable notion of Marxism which emphasises the tutelary powers of the privileged)' (Samuel, 1984, xvii). *Theatres* resumed this concern to avoid what he perceived as the authoritative (and authoritarian) aesthetic generated by too great a reliance on critical theory.

The book's preface was key in setting up the world in which this 'performance' could take place. Alexander, in his discussion of 'dramatic intellectuals', wrote:

To make meaning in synchronic terms, intellectuals define binaries of good and evil. They identify contemporary social arrangements as dangerous and

polluting, and conjure up utopian alternatives, antidotes that promise to purify and save (2017, 107).

Creating such a moral binary allows for the definition of a space where meaningful action can occur, and a framework of judgement can be established for assessing it. In *Theatres*: if history was an activity, always in the making, then anything that allowed this process to occur was a good and anything that restricted or hampered it, bad.

Whereas once, the former communist author might have located the play of this moral system between two poles of position - the proletariat and the bourgeois, the socialist and the conservative - in the late twentieth century, this was insufficient to capture the full complexity of power and productive relationships. So, *Theatres* reconfigured its stage between two poles of practice, invoked through the terms ‘official knowledge’ and ‘unofficial knowledge.’

In an introduction addressing ‘Unofficial Knowledge’, the opening pages began by defining its opposite, ‘official knowledge’, in a deliberately dramatized form (intended, presumably, to emphasise the point):

History, in the hands of the professional historian, is apt to present itself as an esoteric form of knowledge [...] Argument is embedded in dense thickets of footnotage, and lay readers who attempt to unravel it find themselves enmeshed in a cabbala of acronyms, abbreviations and signs (Samuel, 1994, 3).

According to this view, knowledge, in an academic setting, encouraged ‘inbreeding, introspection, sectarianism’ (3) ‘locked up in academic publication and seminar circuits, unknown outside a ‘coven of initiates’ (4).

Not only did this opening serve to represent knowledge as a source of authority and cultural capital within academic settings, it also accused it of assuming an unacknowledged theory of dissemination: ‘Behind such negativities lies the unspoken assumption that knowledge filters

downwards. At the apex there are the chosen few who pilot new arresting hypotheses' (4) Within this hierarchy, it further charged, there were lesser places for amateur enthusiasts, antiquarians, local historians, oral historians, librarians and archivists. At the bottom of this pyramid were ordinary people, the passive receivers of knowledge from above.

This framing of knowledge as power, exercised through discursive practices, echoed a Foucauldian style critique.^{iv} But this was only half the story. Having conjured its opposite, emphasis then turned towards a positive definition of 'unofficial knowledge':

The starting point of *Theatres of Memory* [...] is that history is not the prerogative of the historian, nor even as postmodernism contends, a historian's 'invention.' It is, rather, a social form of knowledge; the work, in any given instance, of a thousand different hands. (8)

Unofficial knowledge, in *Theatres'* world, was free-flowing history-making, grounded in everyday social life, making use of any resources at its disposal and involving everyone: 'if history was thought of as an activity rather than a profession, then the number of its practitioners would be legion' (17). Official knowledge, by contrast, was sober and scholarly, wedded to the written word and the archive, the preserve of a chosen few.

By making an openness of attitude toward history-making the crux of its organisational structure, *Theatres* made space for the 'different readers', 'different ways' and 'different purposes' (x). The conclusion, 'Hybrids', provided the final piece of essential mise-en-scene, a carnivalesque resolution and prototype utopian vision of unbridled historical creativity: 'At a time when numbers in higher education are expanding; when whole new constituencies of research are forming outside the academy [...] it would be absurd for historians to [...] retreat to the cloistered seclusion of a library carrel' (444).

The book did more than describe this world, animated by endless activity, it acted out its own drama, applying these principles structurally as much as in its assertions. This was most evident in its rejection of a single argumentative focus. Whilst bold claims were made for active memory and an expanding historical culture, there was no more specific historical, theoretical or political argument advanced through a clearly defined chain of reasoning. This is not to say that it did not propose arguments about, for example, the relationship between decolonisation and historical consciousness or the impact of a growing mass media on popular perceptions of the national past. It addressed these ideas and many more besides, but it made no single one its primary thesis nor even the focal point of a chapter. Within individual chapters, not only were single arguments eschewed but the very possibility of ‘argument’, in a sectarian sense of colliding positions, seemed impossible, such was the multiplicity of perspectives on offer. This gave the book an air of having, in the words of historian Eric Hobsbawm, ‘neither structure nor limits’ but being instead ‘an unending and astonishingly learned perambulation around the wonderful landscapes of memory and the lives of common people’ (2002, 212). In this way, *Theatres* attempted to model the epistemological pluralism it advocated.

This did not, however, as Hoggart had contended in his review, collapse history into total relativism (1995). The validity of different forms of historical knowledge was acknowledged, not merely dismissed as ideological constructions, literary strategies or linguistic games.^v At the same time, all were continually viewed in relation to their wider social contexts of production. For example, in a later chapter, it was not ‘wrong’ for members of the political left to cite heritage as ‘the medium through which a Conservative version of the national past becomes hegemonic’ (Samuel, 1994, 242) but this claim had to be understood with reference to the left’s political interests and contrasted against alternative claims, each with their own vantage point and criteria of critique. Within each of these highly particular contexts, only one general assertion could be ventured safely about heritage: ‘culturally it is pluralist’ (281).

In setting up the ‘world’ of its stage, *Theatres* was characterised by spaciousness. At every point it refused readers easy conclusions or signposts. Equipped with only a broad ethical framework that commended openness and disapproved of restrictions, readers were left to find their own way through its mercurial landscapes, forced to perpetually suspend judgement in the wake of an avalanche of endlessly shifting evidence. By not pursuing an explicit argumentative or narrative line, it encouraged, even forced readers to be active in the construction of meaning.

Content and Style: Unfolding drama

If *Theatres* was loose in structure it was dense in content. Its most commented upon feature was its inclusion of an overwhelming array of material. Even for a social history of popular culture, its reach was extraordinary. Analyses of history in print and visual media, the tourism industry, school curricula, theatre and the arts might have been expected^{vi}, but *Theatres* included even more minute, everyday items such as biscuit wrappers, jam jar labels and toilet paper, illuminating the most ordinary and disposable of objects as worthy of serious attention, transforming even the kitchen bin into an archive. Not only did this demonstrate how accessible the starting points for historical research could be, it had, the effect of puncturing any casual sense of ‘everydayness’ by making the most overlooked of items loom large, suddenly strange in a new exposure.

Whilst the eclecticism of the source material was not in itself greatly unusual, the embrace of diverse, often contradictory approaches to handling them was more remarkable. *Theatres* repeatedly switched ‘voices’, making any simple classification of its primary methodology difficult. Chapters such as ‘Unofficial Knowledge’ or ‘Genealogies’, for example, provided sweeping historical surveys. These did not work chronologically but moved freely across time periods, encompassing all from the very ancient to the day of writing. In chapters like

‘Retrofitting’, contemporary practices were examined through a mode of historical ethnography whilst in ‘Heritage Baiting’ historical-sociology was employed. Chapters such as ‘Who Calls So Loud?’ were auto-ethnographical.

Whatever mode of analysis it happened to be using, a recurrent feature of the writing was its elaborate style. Sentences could often last for four lines, sometimes up to six, containing multiple layers of information and references. For example:

‘Living history’ was also caught up in 1960s retrochic and indeed at the end of the decade, when ‘yesterday’s advertisements’ began to appear as the latest thing in poster art, and when the replica production of Victoriana took off (Dodo Designs Ltd, founded in 1966, produced an eclectic mixture of revivalist kitsch, ranging from Victorian fob-watches to eighteen- and nineteenth-century insurance company enamels) the overlap shows every sign of becoming a convergence (194).

This sentence could have been broken down into two, or more, shorter sentences. By using longer, more grammatically complex sentences, *Theatres* created a mellifluous rhythm, mimicking a stream of consciousness effect, conversational rather than instructional, smooth rather than abrupt.

The book’s lyricism, its ornate asides, indirectness and multi-vocality, helped to conjure a good humoured narrational presence; amiable, non-combative and infectiously enthusiastic. This formed part of a wider use of comedy as the book’s prevailing mood. It praised, even admired, the ‘playfulness’ to be found in popular history practices, on retrochic for example: ‘It is deficient in what the Victorians called High Seriousness, drawing much of its pleasure from the play of the incongruous or the bizarre’ (112). Some of the funniest passages in the book were spirited mockeries of the humourless professional or theorist:

As moral aristocrats, waging war on the corruptions of capitalist society, socialists, like the radical nonconformists who preceded them, have often been at their fiercest when denouncing *Vanity Fair*, or [...] the ‘vulgar materialism’ of capitalist society. (262)

Subtler still was the subversion of traditional academic apparatus such as footnotes. These were treated with a peculiar mixture of deep seriousness and almost cavalier disregard. For example, alongside conventional scholarly references were carefully recorded trips to a local supermarket, treated with both earnestness and mockery:

58. Visit to Sainsbury’s, Islington, 21 September 1993. Jacobs grain crackers by contrast ‘baked with kibbled wheat, barley flakes and bran’ seem from the logo to have been fired in a village church; while McVitie’s Abbey Crunch (‘light and oat’) seem, from the medieval motif, to have been baked before the dissolution of the monasteries. (117)

Elsewhere, as Thomas observed, with some disquiet, another note simply stated that the source in question had been ‘misplaced’ (1995, 7-8). Here, lost evidence was not quietly omitted to preserve a veneer of scholarly integrity but openly declared missing. There’s little doubt it probably had been but including the reference regardless made a symbolic stand against the historian’s most trusted tool of professional authority.

Theatres also provided a dramatis personae of stock characters which were, again, deliberately, even crudely exaggerated. These caricatures served three main purposes: firstly, they provided illustrative symbols for *Theatres*’ moral universe (official – bad; unofficial – good). Secondly, they acted as metonymic symbols of their social contexts and relations to power (for example, the academy, or literary world). Finally, they provided the tools for their own critique, exposing

the limitations of social identities that had become atrophied, failing to adapt and change with the times (Stott, 2004, 40).

Amongst the main villains of the piece (the officials) were professional historians: ‘Academic rivals engage in gladiatorial combat, now circling one another warily, now moving in for the kill’(Samuel, 1994, 4); intellectual aesthetes: ‘The idea that the masses, if left to their own devices, are moronic; that their pleasures are unthinking; their tastes cheapo and nasty, is a favourite conceit of the aesthete – as it was of their predecessors’ (267); and political theorists:

If in one set of discriminations heritage is accused of being crypto-feudal – a vast system of outdoor relief for decayed gentlefolk -in another it is charged with being ‘deeply capitalist’, albeit in a post-modern rather than a proto-industrial vein. (242).

These ‘baddies’ stalked the pages of the book, popping up now again to dampen spirits, only to be briskly lampooned and set back in their place by the genial narrator^{vii}

By contrast, the heroes of *Theatres* were the unassuming makers of history, not in pursuit of intellectual glory or political victory, merely making and re-making the past in close dialogue with their lives in the present, not always consciously and not always through words but through the interactions with the local communities, environments, through their leisure activities, through their own story-telling practices amongst friends and family.

Within this everyday heroism, there was respectful recognition for the extra diligent:

We might begin by recognizing the enormous scholarly input involved in retrieval projects, saluting the courage of those who have risked their lives – and in the case of the scuba-divers occasionally lost them – to enlarge the domain of the historically known. (274)

And the especially creative:

The pawnbroker at the Black Country Museum, Dudley, drawing on local knowledge of the three brass balls – not least that of the town’s one surviving pawnbroker – had found a narrative for every object in his store [...] The 1920s storekeeper explaining the mysteries and signs of the grocery trade was a mine of information, most of it gleaned, she explained from museum visitors (280)

In the pages devoted to these anti-hero heroes, comedy gave way to romance, worked up to a strong intensity when defending them from the alleged condescension of academic historians, effectively inverting the distribution of expertise and reversing the flow of power:

Are we not guilty ourselves of turning knowledge into an object of desire? [...] Do we not require of our readers, when facing them with one of our own period reconstructions, as willing a suspension of disbelief as the ‘living history’ spectacle of the open-air museum or theme park? Is not the historical monograph, after its fashion, as much a packaging of the past as costume drama? (271)

This passage was likely intended to be provocative, nevertheless its implications were striking. History’s claim to a more privileged insight into the past was deflated. The difference between history and memory was recast as one of relative discursive authority. But, as Collini had asked in his review (1993), what, role was the professionally trained historian to take in such an inclusive and ever-expanding culture of history making?

Theatres did not address this question directly but nevertheless embodied a response. If history was a social knowledge, with no one position, set of ideas or practices having a more privileged claim to ‘truth’ than any other, the historian could no longer act as a ‘legislator’ of historical

knowledge (Bauman, 1987, 4). Nor could they simply turn ‘interpreter’, translating statements from one ‘communally-based tradition’ for use within another system of knowledge (5), this still implied a privileged role. Instead, they had to relinquish much of their traditional authority altogether, becoming, instead, a catalyst in a sustained dialogue between different registers of knowledge (for a fuller account of this role see Kalela, 2012; an interesting contrast can also be made with Ranciere, 1991).

This process, although un-signposted, played out across *Theatres*’ chapters. Analysis would begin with a detailed description of a physical, object or tangible experience, often something very unassuming or familiar (a jar label, an old photograph), typically taken from everyday life. From here, description was drawn outwards and connections forged between objects with shared traits or characteristics, or by exploring the object’s wider location in greater depth. Finally, concrete description was eased towards posing more abstract questions concerning ‘why’ specific uses or responses had arisen and how these could be framed in relation to wider social and political contexts. In doing this *Theatres* was, again, a source of suggestions (underlining my own to indicate ‘suggestive’ language):

The revival of brick could be seen as the nether side of comprehensive clearance and redevelopment [...] Another way of approaching the matter would be in terms of urban eugenics [...] ‘Double-coding’ might also help to resolve the mystery of how it is that neo-vernacular, though marketed as regional and local, is international in character. (Samuel, 130-1)

The chapter ‘Who Calls So Loud: Dickens on Stage and Screen’, the last in the book, showcased this active thinking process in full. Once again, it carefully eschewed abstraction, opting instead for an auto-ethnographic approach, another example of *Theatres*’ commitment

to domesticating theory by situating it amidst the flow of the narrator's everyday life, dissolving the separation between researcher and subject (see Johnson et al, 2018, 10).

The opening paragraphs introduced his first encounter with Dickens' *Little Dorrit*, read as a honeymoon activity, which, in contrast to an academic seminar room or library carrel, was an intimate setting. These sections detailed his initial, half-formed impressions: 'Society is a swindle, government a cheat. Marriages are loveless [...] The family is a site of imprisonment [...] Even the benevolent characters are malignant' (Samuel, 413) these were then deepened, over time, in discussion with his partner and through grafting them onto the familiar spaces and settings in his life:

we found ourselves recognizing the insistently coquettish Flora in one of our friends; and more discomfortingly had to acknowledge a likeness between Mrs Plornish's make-believe Arcady in Bleeding Heart Yard and our own terraced cottage in Spitalfields. (414)

This showcased how his understanding of *Little Dorrit* was mediated through analogy and integration with pre-existing interpretive structures which, in turn, altered them.

Paragraph four presented a disturbance to this framework triggered by the couple's viewing of a contemporary film version of *Little Dorrit* which neither enjoyed. The discomfort came slowly: 'It was only walking home that doubts began to appear' (414), small details nagged at them: 'Why, we asked, had it all been so clean? Why was the light so bright? Had not much of the narrative been enacted in darkness; Little Dorrit wending her way through the midnight streets of the metropolis?' (414). These questions illuminated how a state of doubt arose through conflict between the original interpretation which gave rise to expectations, and those expectations being frustrated or unfulfilled. Eventually the narrator conceded that what puzzled him the most was why he had been so unmoved by the same the story that had fascinated him

in book form. Probing at this personal reaction and reflecting on his instinctive questions, he offered a tentative hypothesis which echoed the core argument of *Theatres* (underlining and parenthesis my own): ‘It seemed that we had been witness to a spectacle [passive] rather than engaged by a drama [active]’ (414-5).

The rest of the chapter expanded upon this insight by investigating the film in relation to different contexts such as previous productions performed in different mediums, changing literary receptions of Dickens and shifting tastes in popular entertainment. By the end of the piece the narrator reached, if not an end, then a pause in reflection:

Conversely, the critical and radical intentions of Edzard’s Little Dorrit are continually betrayed by the prettiness of the scenic properties. This is not [...] a matter of artistic failure but rather of an imaginative revolution which has taken place in perceptions of the Victorian past, and the altogether new value conservatism has given to ‘period’ setting. (423)

Here politics and pedagogy converged with history; the critical project of modern historical scholarship and intellectual life, stemming from an Enlightenment faith in an ‘authentic’, objective, empirical reality, had solidified into such a familiar image that it had lost its power to challenge expectations. In creating too ‘seamless’ a version of this image, the film had left the audience unperturbed, un-stung to the sort of active reflection which the chapter’s narrator so painstakingly documented. By contrast, *Theatres* set out an unsettling kaleidoscope world of magnified minutiae and fractured arguments: a perforated past with all its construction markings on show.

Conclusion

Rather than stalling in an early developmental stage of cultural Marxism, as Johnson and other critics implied, *Theatres* referenced a distinctive activist politics which took participation as its

core value. In recognising knowledge as socially constituted and ideologically inscribed it shared aspects of the theoretical positions assumed by its critics but what distinguished its position was Samuel's scepticism towards an all-encompassing application of theory which, he felt, concentrated explanatory power in the hands of a small number of 'experts'. Such elitism had long been profoundly antithetical to his political thought. By contrast, *Theatres* 'showed' rather than 'told' its views on the relationships between knowledge, power and emancipation, acting them out, enlarged and elaborated to drive home the point.

As Hall suggested (quoted above), the book was deeply embedded within the life, times, and political arguments of its author, a possible reason why its impact has been limited. Whilst occasionally referenced in studies specifically addressing cultural heritage and public history (see for example Smith, 2006; Hodgkin and Radstone, 2006; Kalela, 2012; Radstone 2016), its wider political and pedagogical ramifications have been less acknowledged. Even in left-wing historiography, its home territory, *Theatres* does not enjoy the same iconic status as, for example, Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). By contrast to the prominence of the latter, it is comparatively obscure. And yet, no less than *The Making*, it signalled an important ideological transition, a move away from history as a counter-cultural narrative of democracy, towards history-making as a counter-cultural democratic practice.

Ironically, the book's marginal status owes much to the very techniques used to demonstrate its principles which made it difficult to see the pathway from the position it criticised to the one it advocated, nor the desirability of such a change. The lack of any explicit theorization or argumentation sealed its absence from 'routine' intellectual acknowledgement. What was calculated to charm and enchant could also frustrate and obscure. For all this, however, the book could not have been other than what it was without risking a fall into the sort of vanguardism so abhorrent to its author. For Samuel, change had always to be organic, direct

from the readers who, having once shared history's stage in *Theatres*, could never again be content only to look on from behind the page.

Endnotes

ⁱ Historically Ruskin College was a college for working class adult education.

ⁱⁱ Raphael Samuel's extensive archive is held at the Bishopsgate Institute, London.

ⁱⁱⁱ To maintain focus on how these values were realised technically in the text, I have avoided naming Samuel directly referring to 'the author' or 'the narrator' instead.

^{iv} An interesting contrast is offered by Pierre Bourdieu in *Homo Academicus* (1988) a Marxist materialist account of the internal power structures which shape the production of academic knowledge.

^v For Samuel's critique of postmodernism see: Raphael Samuel, 'Reading the Signs I', *History Workshop Journal*, 32 (1991): 82-109; 'Fact Grubbers and Mind Readers', *History Workshop Journal*, 33 (1991): 220-51.

^{vi} A useful contrast is offered by Jerome de Groot, *Consuming History*, (Routledge, 2009).

^{vii} The ferocity of this critique struck many as disingenuous, even hypocritical given that Samuel was an Oxford history graduate and professional historian himself (Wright, 1985; Collini 1993). Certainly, Samuel was speaking from a highly privileged position which he failed to acknowledge. For this reason, as I have argued throughout this paper, *Theatres* should be read as, in part, a polemical text which drew on rhetorical techniques, such as caricature and over-dramatization, to force home its political point.

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