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An activist stage craft? Performative politics in the First British New Left (1956–1962)

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ABSTRACT

The First British New Left (NL) (1956–1962) formed around two journals, The New Reasoner (NR) edited by E.P.Thompson and John Saville, and the Universities and Left Review (ULR) edited by Stuart Hall, Gabriel Pearson, Raphael Samuel and Charles Taylor. Both sought a 'new' socialism which, based on a loose concept of socialist humanism, restored the role of the individual and revitalised a popular left movement. Early commentators critiqued its lack of robust theory and organisational structure. More recently, others have proposed that, particularly amongst the ULR cohort, with this 'new' socialism emerged a 'new' activist politics. Building on this, I examine the ULR's activism as a performative politics which stressed active participation over theory and dissolved any distinction between means and ends. Whilst Thompson and Hall have tended to be considered the main protagonists in shaping this, I argue that it was Samuel, an experienced organiser, who was most responsible for shaping their early agenda. His role has been neglected because he wrote no 'position piece' but, appropriately for an activist politics, expressed his ideas through his actions. 'Reading' his performances, then, illuminates more fully both the scope and the limits of this activist politics.

1. Introduction

The first British New Left (1956–1962) (NL) formed to address a crisis in socialism. Whilst the immediate triggers were the discreditation of Communism following the Khrushchev revelations, the Soviet invasion of Hungary, and ineffective parliamentary opposition to the British invasion of Suez (in sharp contrast to vigorous popular dissent[1]), these were only symptoms. The traditional categories and methods of class-based politics appeared increasingly inadequate to account for, much less contain, the scale of change transforming British society. As Labour's successive electoral defeats (1951, 1955, and consequently 1959) suggested, there were serious limits to managerial welfarism in an age of affluence and the bomb. 'We must square our philosophy with the conditions of the world today and tomorrow,' GDH Cole warned a Fabian conference in 1950, 'unless we are content to be the dying advocates of a lost cause.'[2]

The NL took up that challenge. Developing around two journals – the *New Reasoner* (NR) (1956–1960), edited by ex-communists John Saville and EP Thompson, and *Universities and Left*

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[1]'Franco-British attack on Suez' *Life* 41, 21, 19 November (1956), 44. The report estimates that over 10,000 people attended anti-war protests in London's Trafalgar Square.

[2]Quoted in Ben Jackson, *Equality and the British Left: A Study in Progressive Political Thought 1900–64* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 151

Review (ULR) (1957–1960), from Oxford graduates, Stuart Hall, Charles Taylor, Gabriel Pearson, and Raphael Samuel (the latter two also ex Party members) – they sought, from the outset, grounds for a 'new socialism' based loosely on a concept of socialist humanism which emphasised human agency and popular movement. By the end of 1957, the ULR contingent had acquired headquarters in Soho, opened the Partisan café, developed a burgeoning club network, and were closely involved in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. In 1960, they merged with the NR to form the *New Left Review* (NLR), with Hall in post as chief editor until his resignation in 1962.[3]

Perry Anderson, on assuming control of the NLR in 1962, became the NL's first major interpreter. Concerned to differentiate his own project from what had gone before, he advanced a chilly critique of his predecessors for their unexamined appeals to humanist morality and lack of organisational structure.[4] Consequent accounts have been more generous, highlighting the breadth of the first NL's interests, the unifying themes of human agency, cultural change, and the contributions of key individuals, typically Thompson, Hall, Raymond Williams, and Richard Hoggart. Nevertheless, whilst more sympathetic, they followed Anderson in perceiving a general want of theoretical clarity and structure.[5]

Madeleine Davis challenged this consensus arguing for a reappraisal of Thompson's concept of socialist humanism. Drawing from English ethical socialist and libertarian traditions, specifically the ideas of William Morris, Thompson attempted to temper the excessive determinism of Stalinist-Marxism by restoring the individual to the core of socialist thinking (a project culminating in his magnum opus *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963)).[6] Davis noted that although the ULR cohort were receptive to Thompson, they perceived a fundamental tension between Marxism and Humanism in his argument and, consequently, developed a variation through their activist politics.[7]

This paper builds on Davis' case but argues that whilst Thompson and, from the ULR side, Hall, to a lesser extent Taylor, are generally considered the main protagonists in shaping this alternative politics, it was Samuel who, as the ULR's primary architect, was most responsible for shaping its agenda. The former Communist is better known now as the founder of the first British History Workshop movement (1963–1979), author of the idiosyncratic *Theatres of Memory* (1994) and champion of public history, but, as Hall acknowledged, until the merger with NR in 1960, he was the NL's 'engine, its political motor, its moving spirit.'[8] For the first three years of its life, 1957–1959, he was the only one to work on it full time (unpaid).[9] Until recently, however, he has been a relatively neglected figure in NL historiography, a poltergeist whose effects were everywhere felt but rarely acknowledged.[10] Such neglect is partly because he wrote no position piece to which his name can be easily linked. He was an organiser and, as his friend, historian Sheila Rowbotham explains, whilst:

> Writers leave visible traces … Organisers, in contrast, have a powerful impact upon those with whom they have direct contact but tend to live on in oral memory alone.[11]

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[3] Stuart Hall, 'Life and Times of the First New Left', *New Left Review* 61, Jan–Feb (2010): 177–95. See also Peter Sedgwick, 'The Two New Lefts', *International Socialism*, Summer (1964).

[4] Perry Anderson, 'Origins of the Present Crisis', *New Left Review* I/23, Jan–Feb (1964): 26–53; 'The Left in the Fifties', *New Left Review* 1/29, Jan–Feb (1965): 3–18; 'Socialism and Pseudo-Empiricism', *New Left Review* 1/35 (1966): 2.42; *Arguments within English Marxism* (London: Verso, 1980).

[5] 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, *Cultural Marxism in Post War Britain* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997). For a critique of New Left historiography see Dorothy Thompson, 'On the Trail of the First New Left', *New Left Review* 1/215, Jan–Feb (1996): 93–100.

[6] E.P. Thompson, 'Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines Part I/II', *New Reasoner* 1 (1957): 105–43. See also E.P. Thompson, 'The New Left', *New Reasoner* 9 (1959): 1–17; 'Commitment in Politics', *Universities and Left Review* 6 (1959): 50–5; *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963).

[7] Charles Taylor, 'Marxism and Humanism', *New Reasoner* 2 (1957): 92–8; Davis, 'Reappraising Socialism Humanism', *Journal of Political Ideologies* 18, no. 1 (2013): 57–81 (66–77).

[8] Stuart Hall, 'Raphael Samuel, 1934–1996', *New Left Review* I/221, Jan–Feb (1997): 119–27.

[9] Brian Harrison, 'Interview with Raphael Samuel: 18 September 1987', transcripts held in author's collection.

[10] Sophie Scott-Brown, *The Histories of Raphael Samuel: Portrait of a People's Historian* (ANU Press, 2017).

[11] Sheila Rowbotham, 'Some Memories of Raphael Samuel', *New Left Review* I/221, Jan–Feb (1997): 128–32.

Appropriately enough for an activist politics, his thinking was expressed through his actions.

Samuel did not invent the idea of politics-as-practice any more than Thompson invented socialist humanism. He borrowed from many sources, not least his own background as a Communist organiser, but it was he who channelled it into the NL's practical, iconic forms: the journal, the café, the club network, even his own persona. Reading his performances, then, illuminates more fully the ULR's activism as a critical realisation of socialist humanism.

Thompson's socialist humanism contained a paradox. Whilst effective as a diagnostic critique of Stalinism, it was hard to reframe into a coherent ideological alternative. Privileging individual liberty as a political end and human agency as a political means meant that no single ideal of either could be prescribed without falling into bad faith with the main principles. Thompson, Taylor argued, had undermined his case by retaining Marx's central image of the human-as-proletariat. In Marx, true and full humanity was only possible through the liberation of productive potential. Until that point, people remained in a dehumanised state. Where, asked Taylor, did that leave 'those men and women who have no part in the development of human potential'? What value had a person 'even unregenerate and resisting the most elementary social justice?' It was not enough to say that the proletariat could not be free without liberating the rest of humanity, socialist humanism had always to add that 'the proletariat must not free itself by depriving some men of their status as human beings.'[12]

To retain logical and moral consistency the socialist humanist had, in the words of Williams, to fully 'concede the practice of democracy.'[13] This, however, left them unable to articulate a single common vision or direct a programme of action towards its realisation. The ULR's answer to this was to collapse the distinction between ends and means altogether, and favour the fullest concession of practice possible in the present over the possibility of a total one in the future. As such, it was much more important to encourage active, voluntary participation by accommodating a plurality of viewpoints, even conflicting ones, than it was to resolve theoretical tensions. But balancing all this whilst retaining any sort of unity of purpose required a skilful organiser which was where Samuel came in.

In this paper, I briefly survey his background and consider how the circumstances of his communist childhood furnished him with a set of skills uniquely suited to the task. I then turn to examine how he engineered the 'mise-en-scene' for the ULR, spaces which stimulated action but had a relatively low level of (explicit) direction. Finally, I consider how, he reconfigured the persona of the socialist intellectual when prompted by a collision with Thompson, the first of several the two would have during their lives.

2. Prologue

Born into a North London Jewish community on 26 December 1934, Samuel became aware of social performance from an early age. His mother Minna Samuel's (nee Nerenstein) family ran a bookshop specialising in Jewish literature and his Uncle, Chimen Abramsky, was a highly regarded Hebraic scholar. Yiddish was spoken at home, Jewish customs and festivals observed. Outside the family and community, he attended English schools, anglicised his name to Ralph and smuggled Thomas Paine in to read during his Hebrew lessons. This all amounted to an early training in careful self-presentation, an ability to adjust his language and behaviour according to whether he was with his religious grandparents or father, Barnett Samuel, his school friends, or his mother Minna.[14]

In 1939, disillusioned with the Labour Party's stance on the Spanish Civil War, Minna followed sisters in joining the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), throwing herself into activism with

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[12]Taylor, 'Marxism and Humanism', 96.
[13]Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780–1950* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1958), 341.
[14]Sophie Scott-Brown, 'An Ingrained Activist', in *Historians, Biographies and Autobiographies: Their Historiographic Importance*, ed. Doug Munro and John Reid (ANU Press, 2017).

gusto as Party Organiser for the Slough branch. Samuel grew up amid his mother's relentless whirl of political activity, a ceaseless procession of campaigns and initiatives that seeped into the fabric of his childhood, from party literature on the kitchen table and urgent meetings in the sitting room to hiking holidays with the comrades.[15]

If Minna epitomised for her son the role of the grass roots organiser, she did not invent it. As Samuel later documented, it was clearly defined in Party handbooks:

> In the localities, too, authority was expected to be self-effacing. Branch secretaries were expected to comport themselves as co-workers, taking on a good deal of the dogsbody work, as the price of the trust which reposed in them. At branch meetings he/she was to exercise a pastoral care, drawing the members in by allocating tasks to them, 'involving' them in the processes of decision making […] encouraging newcomers to 'express' themselves […][16]

and:

> One started at the 'level' of the sympathiser, emphasising common ground, 'building' on particular issues, while at the same time investing them with Party-mindedness. Plied with Party literature, invited to Party meetings, above all 'involved' in some species of Party work […] the sympathiser was drawn into the comradeship of the Party by a hundred subtle threats […][17]

The precision of the role owed much to the Comintern shift from 'Class Against Class' to 'Popular Front' in 1935. Whilst 'Class Against Class' had insisted on strict allegiance to the proletarian cause, effectively alienating the national Party branches from other progressive forces in their countries, now alliances were openly sought. The change meant a more outward facing attitude towards collaboration which, in turn, recalibrated the practice of Party activism, placing greater emphasis on the arts of friendly persuasion than pugilistic argument.

By 1952, the peak of the Cold War, Party strategy had changed again. With Communists the new public enemy, aspiring organisers had to work with even great subtlety. For Samuel, now a modern history student at Balliol College, Oxford, this was a precarious but strangely exciting time. Charm and persuasiveness had always been important tools in the recruiter's armoury, now they were indispensable. As he later recalled in an interview:

> the great fear of Communism was of being an outcast. The whole effort was simply to accept our legitimacy. And that meant quite a lot of bending, in effect, to, as it were, present a political position in a palatable way, as it were in liberal terms. So a lot of my communism by force of necessity became a re-presentation of belief in terms that could be sympathised with, and ideally, supported by liberals.[18]

Alongside this sort of code switching, he used other techniques. One was to get himself intimately involved with the Oxford Socialist Club, the Oxford Labour Club and to become the 'licenced Communist' at GDH Cole's socialist seminar group. He even attended the odd meeting of the Oxford Conservatives, willing to seize any opportunity for debate in the student common rooms, considering it a victory just to be taken seriously.[19] More effective were his efforts to engage in cross-party campaigns which included anti-colonial campaigns, H-Bomb testing and even joining Taylor in his critique of Oxford analytic philosophy. As Hall later recalled 'He was both the pariah and the heart and soul of the Oxford political scene.' Another initiative was to commandeer a platform for himself. In 1953, he took charge of publicity for, The Oxford Left, the Oxford Socialist Club's journal. One year later he was listed as sole editor, taking the opportunity to rehearse many of the issues that would preoccupy the ULR writers including on imperialism, contemporary socialism, the middle

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[15]Raphael Samuel, *The Lost World of British Communism* (Verso, 2006), 63–8; See also Alex May, 'Keal, Minna (1909–1999)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
[16]Samuel, *The Lost World*, 125.
[17]Ibid., 125–6.
[18]Brian Harrison, 'Interview with Raphael Samuel', 18 September 1987, transcripts held in author's collection.
[19]John Keegan, 'Raphael Samuel' *The Daily Telegraph*, 12 December 1996.

classes, and the role of intellectuals.[20] Finally, there was always the sheer force of his personality to fall back upon. Hall again:

> His passionate intensity was overwhelming. He could fix you with his deep, dark eyes and, especially when he was trying to persuade you about the unpersuadable, his voice would acquire a deep, rich seductiveness and gradually what you had originally thought to be your 'better judgement' would slowly melt away.[21]

In summary, Samuel's North London Jewish, popular front, Cold War communist upbringing equipped him with a set of organisational skills that he could not have cultivated to such a degree at any other time: speak to people in their own 'languages,' turn every opportunity to your advantage, get people involved and let them convert themselves.

3. Crafting the mise en scene

Samuel experienced the Khrushchev revelations and the Hungarian uprising as a personal catastrophe. Not without reluctance, he resigned his membership and with it his hopes of becoming a full time Party Organiser. But, as he would later reflect, 'I really was an organiser and believed in organisation and believed really in discipline, I suppose, and it was a belief in unity and above all … I believed in being positive.'[22] He wasted little time, having graduated from Oxford with a brilliant first he returned to London for further study but was quickly overtaken with organising the anti-Suez protests in Trafalgar Square, on the 4 November 1956.

Encouraged by the large turnout – a striking display of young middle-class radicalism – and their previous involvement with the *Oxford Left,* it was natural that he and fellow graduates Hall, Taylor and Pearson would turn their minds to getting up a journal, joking amongst themselves about who might write on what. It was Samuel, however, who forged ahead, transforming the informal discussions into a tangible shape. On the 15 November, he wrote to Hall:

> The magazine should be designed to appeal to left wing dons especially the 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.[23]

Developing this further a fortnight later:

> 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 rethinking, to take the discussion out of the relatively narrow circle of LP [Labour Party], CP [Communist Party], and Fabian activists in which the discussion is at present confined.[24]

From the outset, he identified 'rethinking' as the group's main objective and recognised intellectual workers, rather than the industrial working class, as the primary audience. Aside from the practical fact that the four editors were already well established in the world of student politics, this was the group who had turned out in force against Suez, who were politically energised but unaffiliated and, therefore, lacking previous deep commitments, most likely to be receptive towards 'rethinking.' Strategically speaking, this was also a generation on the cusp of their careers. In several cases, those studying at Oxford or Cambridge were, quite literally, the politicians and civil servants of the future. A higher proportion still were likely to enter the public service roles generated by the welfare state in social administration, health, education, and planning. Engaging with students

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[20]Raphael Samuel, 'Socialism and the Middle Classes', *Oxford Left,* Hillary Term (1954), 24–7; 'The Mind of British Imperialism', *Oxford Left,* Michaelmas Term (1954), 40–8.

[21]Stuart Hall, 'Raphael Samuel 1934–1996', *Radical Philosophy* 82 (1997): 125.

[22]Brian Harrison, 'Interview with Raphael Samuel', 18 September 1987, transcripts in author's collection.

[23]Ralph Samuel, 'Letter to Stewart Hall', 15 November 1956, RS.1: New Left/001, '1956', Raphael Samuel Archive, Bishopsgate Institute, London.

[24]Ralph Samuel, 'Letter to Stewart Hall', 1 December 1956, RS.1: New Left/001, '1956', Raphael Samuel Archive, Bishopsgate Institute, London.

now meant the potential to infiltrate influential sectors at all levels of civil and political society in the future.

The quotes also show how he saw the journal itself as an active part of this process, embodying, in physical form, the same rethinking of political space that it sought to generate. It had to embrace plurality and cultivate inclusivity but, at the same time, engineer enough common ground for a shared conversation. It was a difficult balance to strike. Reflecting on the matter Samuel wrote:

> 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.[25]

Translating abstract ideals into topical issues allowed the journal to cast its net widely as people gravitated towards the matter that most interested them. Once engaged on the topic of their choice, it was easier to draw readers further in by demonstrating connections between apparently disparate themes. Samuel's content wish list for the first edition sketched how this might done:

> The Future of Marxism: An intermediate statement, Eric Hobsbawm; Labour Re-think Economics, Joan Robinson; French Intellectuals and the French Working Class, JP 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; and Labour Careerism, Thomas Balogh[26]

To this he added a further 12 suggestions including proposals for article series on town planning, architecture, health, and education, all hot topics of the day which their readers would be familiar with. Stripped of their agit-prop stylings, his choices reveal that he considered revising traditional Marxist theory, addressing Labour and the parliamentary system, and assessing the social impact of affluence on Britain as the three main co-ordinates around which to organise the rethinking process.

It was not just the topics. The writers were also selected for both symbolic and pragmatic reasons. Robinson and Balogh were academic economists known to him through the Oxford Labour club, their criticisms of Labour were less likely to be dismissed as mere ideological carping. Hobsbawm, one of the 'liberal communists' who had remained in the Party but was fighting for reform, could combine insider insight with measured analysis. Hall, originally from Jamaica, and Taylor from Canada, could provide refreshing perspectives on British class structure and intellectual culture. Sartre, the greatest left intellectual celebrity of the day was likely to be known beyond narrowly left circles, especially amongst the student population.

In the event, he largely got his way with most of the topics covered in the first few issues. Notably, however, not the one he had allocated to himself. Many, but not all, of his writer line-up contributed and he made up for omissions by canvassing his extensive political network and convincing other prominent figures from international socialist journalism, including GDH Cole, Claude Bourdet, and Isaac Deutscher, to pitch in. Alongside the well-known names were student writers and young lecturers. The result was an eclectic blend which, together with the standard fare of political economics, carried equally intense pieces on architecture and planning, education, contemporary visual art, literature, and cinema.[27]

An exciting start (although, for all the claims of newness, 'the general atmosphere' sniffed one reviewer, was still 'that of dissident Marxism'[28]), but how was a casual reader to be converted into a consistent and even pro-active one? Samuel proposed that:

[25]Ibid.

[26]Ralph Samuel, 'Letter to Stewart Hall', 15 November 1956.

[27]Lindsay Anderson, 'Commitment in Cinema Criticism', *Universities and Left Review* 1 (1957): 44–39; Peter de Francia, 'Commitment in Art Criticism', *Universities and Left Review* 1 (1957): 49–52; David Marquand, 'Lucky Jim and the Labour Party', *Universities and Left Review* 1 (1957): 57–60.

[28]Colin Ward, 'University Probes and Publications', *Freedom*, 1 June 1957.

the only way to provide for the interests of such a diverse group of readers … 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 have fifteen letters on say ten different topics, we could show the range of interest offered by the magazine.[29]

Using readers' letters as an impromptu networking tool simply updated the old Communist recruitment principle that people became more committed when they felt actively involved. There were further benefits, typographically, letters pages were an efficient means of compressing range into an easily digestible form. By displaying short comments on different issues next to one another, it became easier to 'see' the common threads between them.

Form had further importance. Samuel deliberately preferred the term 'magazine' to journal in his correspondence. In part, this was to distance the ULR from the visual austerity commonly associated with traditional socialist publications. It was also a deliberate play to grab a youth audience. The first edition, for example, was printed on glossy paper with a full colour front cover, graphic design, and contemporary typeface – chunky squared black letters protruding from white blocks – for the title. Inside articles were introduced with bold headlines, spaciously arranged into columns, further broken down into sub headed sections for easy navigation and quick comprehension. The impact of these sort of fine details becomes clear when compared to the first edition of Thompson and Saville's NR. By contrast, the NR's cover was soberly demure, red lettering in a central alignment on a beige matte background. Inside, articles and essays appeared in dense single column format. Whilst some of these addressed poetry and history, there was nothing on cinema or contemporary visual arts. Thompson, at 32, was the youngest of the contributors (in contrast to the ULR where five of the 18 contributors to the first issue were under 30).[30]

Initially, Samuel's planning paid off with the first edition gaining 2500 subscribers before it had even been printed and, in the event, shifting a total of 7000 copies.[31] The question turned to how best to capitalise on this momentum and the answer was soon forthcoming. When the four editors organised a lecture by Deutscher for the magazine's readers, hiring a room in a Bloomsbury hotel for the purpose, they arrived at the venue to discover around 800 people queuing up outside.[32] This was enough to convince Samuel of the need for a headquarters. A further assault on his network managed to generate funds to rent 7 Carlisle Street, Soho, which became an office for the journal, a meeting space and library.

Here was another flexible space intended to invite, rather than dictate, use. From late 1957, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) took early advantage. With its roots deep in the British peace movement, CND emerged from small scale anti-colonial protests in the 1950s (such as Operation Gandhi) which emphasised non-violent direct action and militancy. Where these had typically involved small groups of even individuals, the CND sought to amplify this onto a mass scale. From the start, organisers were conscious of image and planned the iconography carefully. The choice of the Easter weekend, for example, harnessed the seasonal message of repentance and regeneration to present the march as a literal movement 'from the tyranny of destruction to the beginnings of creative democracy.'[33] After the first march (4–7 April 1958) had lost a little momentum as it travelled away from the capital, organisers shrewdly switched the direction of travel now arranging to depart from Aldermaston and finish in London, culminating in a rally in Trafalgar Square resulting in huge crowds of between 10–20,000 in 1959, rising to between 60–100,000 in 1960. In addition, marchers carried banners emblazoned with the CND symbol and sang songs or trudged in an eloquent silence.

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[29]Ibid.
[30]*The New Reasoner*, 1, Spring (1956). Consequently, later editions added more colour and cover illustrations.
[31]Editorial Preliminaries, *Universities and Left Review*, 1 (1957).
[32]Stuart Hall, 'Raphael Samuel 1934–1996'.
[33]*Peace News*, 6 April 1959, 4.

The ULR's relationship with the CND was close but occasionally tense. Although broadly leftist, the CND leadership was by no means exclusively so. Nor were they all especially modern in their outlook, with several distressed at the number of young marchers sporting beards and dressed in duffle coats.[34] Moreover, scope for independent initiatives within the movement was strictly limited. Whilst careful to avoid any semblance of ordered formation, organisers urged marchers to maintain self-discipline at all times and make a full display of civility which, of course, they defined according to their own criteria.[35] Eventually, frustration at restrictions like these led to the formation of a breakaway group, the Committee of 100, which adopted a more militant course of direct action.[36] Nevertheless, for the ULR, the link a vital pipeline to those unaffiliated young people dissatisfied or distrustful toward conventional party politics but passionately politicised, nonetheless. The marches and rallies successfully harnessed their discontent into a powerful dramatic form but for the ULR, the problem of how to transform protest to sustainable constructive action remained. This was where the club network came in.

The network was a means of exporting the prototype Soho model further afield. Again, the point was to be flexible, with groups encouraged to form around issues pertinent to the members or the local area. Individual clubs could gain support from across the network but were not formally required to join anything. The model's looseness allowed clubs to spread across the country appearing in Manchester, Sheffield, Cardiff, Fife, and Edinburgh, as well as other parts of London.[37] Inevitably, many sprang up in universities, colleges and sixth forms. Some were short-lived, others lasted several years. Unsurprisingly, the Oxford club did particularly well where it was enthusiastically taken up by the Labour society (less so by the Socialists) who found the broad-church approach to researching practical contemporary issues amenable. The Oxford club even produced its own magazine, 'New University,' which went on recruiting generations into the mid-sixties.[38]

Whilst universities were the ULR's most natural territory, efforts were made to venture beyond the safety of campus and common room with mixed but important results. Robin Blackburn, a member of the Soho club, recalled Samuel assembling a team to go out to the New Towns (built to alleviate housing shortages and promote social mobility after the War) and interview the new working- and middle-class residents, discussing their lives and views in-depth through 'open-ended and elaborate questionnaires.'[39] The implications of this research, he added, took years to work through and anticipated much consequent work on social and political allegiance in 'affluent' Britain.

Another example was the Notting Hill club, formed in response to the 1958 race riots, which Hall became closely involved with. The area, with its diverse population, high levels of poverty, unemployment and youth crime became a magnet for community development interventions intended to 'manage' race relations or 'solve' the 'race problem' most of which met with resistance, exposing the limitations of imposing paternalistic, top down measures.[40] Here, the ULR club attempted to reverse the direction of travel and encourage leadership to emerge from within the community by offering organisational support.[41] Alex Jacobs, a ULR organiser from East London, later Hollywood screen writer, helped co-ordinate an alternative youth club directed by the members

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[34]Holgar Nehring 'Demonstrating Security', in Nehring, *The Politics of Security: British and West German Protest Movements and the Early Cold War 1945–1970* (Oxford: Oxford University Press). See also Michael Randle, 'Non-violent Direct Action in the 1950s and 1960s', in *Campaigns For Peace: British Peace Movements in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Taylor and Nigel Young (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), 131–61.

[35]Ibid., 197. See also Randle, 'Non-violent Direct Action in the 1950s and 1960s',131–61.

[36]Nicholas Walter and Ruth Walter, 'The Committee of 100 and Anarchism', *Anarchy*, 52, June 1965.

[37]Michael Kenny, *The First New Left: British Intellectuals After Stalin* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1995), 39; Madeleine Davis, 'Among the Ordinary People: New Left Involvement in Working Class Mobilisation 1956–1968', *History Workshop Journal* 5 (2018): 133–59.

[38]Brian Harrison, 'Interview with Raphael Samuel', 17 October 1987, transcripts in author's collection.

[39]Robin Blackburn, 'The Politics of Thick Description', *New Left Review* I/221, Jan/Feb (1997).

[40]Ben Jones and Camilla Schofield, '"Whatever Community is, This It's not it" Notting Hill and the Reconstruction of "Race" in Britain after 1958', *Journal of British Studies* 58, 1 (2019): 142–73.

[41]Stuart Hall, 'ULR Club Notting Hill', *New Left Review* I/1 Jan–Feb (1960): 71–2.

themselves.[42] Others set up a residents' association and organised applications to rent tribunals. Ultimately the initiatives faltered through lack of insider knowledge and diminishing local support, factors which, ironically, only served to validate the importance of community self-direction in devising successful interventions.

Essential though research and campaign planning was, neither were enough to stimulate the larger shift in political culture the ULR group sought. This required a vibrant social life. Samuel came up with the idea for the Partisan Café (London's first anti-expresso bar), and, ignoring the objections raised by the other three editors, launched it with yet more funds borrowed from ex-CPGB comrades. The café was open to anyone to drop in for a Viennese coffee, an Old-Fashioned Pea soup, a debate, and live jazz in the evening. No detail was below Samuel's notice, from the speaker and performer bookings to the layout of tables (arranged into groups of six to eight to maximise intimate small group discussions), even the menu 'part international, part proletarian, part provincial, part Jewish-diasporic,' aimed for gastronomic pluralism (or possibly indigestion).[43]

None of this organisational apparatus was especially innovative. Journals, clubs, study and campaign groups, social events comprise the standard architecture through which most political movements advance. Samuel, long immersed in the intricate arts of organisation for the CPGB, knew it well and, in the face of crisis, fell back on this training. What was different now was that all this crucial mise-en-scene was no longer in service of a larger ideal, it was the ideal. But, without recourse to the unifying force of a single ideal or authoritative party structure, something more than clever design, or even a good jazz night was needed to keep it together; a catalyst to forge connections between all the different components.

4. The dramaturge

Hall's description of Samuel as 'the moving spirit' of the NL was more than a poetic tribute,[44] it also intimated something of how his friend reframed the role of the political intellectual. According to Jeffrey Alexander:

> Powerful intellectuals create symbolic frameworks that re-fuse fragmented meanings, actions, and institutions. They provide a new horizon of meaning for social actors who, having lost the 'sense' of social and cultural circumstance, experience emotional anxiety and existential stress. To command dramatic ideational power, intellectuals must code and narrate newly emerging social realities in a manner that offers salvation [45]

This select group of 'powerful intellectuals' work, in effect, as social dramatists creating the 'poetically potent scripts'[46] through which the world is transfigured with new meaning. Success, he argues, lies in striking the optimum balance between symbolic force and cultural pragmatics (or, how deftly universal values can be inscribed onto, and into, specific historical moments). Success also depends on a second tier of 'backstage' brain work, in translating the ideals into practical actions, embedding them into organisational structures and disseminating them through public education. This is vital work but technical and less glamorous. Whilst often afforded more respect in egalitarian politics, not least for its collegial character, it is generally considered routine and instrumental rather than creative.

Samuel challenged but did not entirely reject this structure. He did not adopt an anti-intellectual position, naively extolling popular wisdom, as some of his critics have claimed.[47] He felt the value of ideas[48] but sought to remove the stratification implied by Alexander's division of labour, to infuse the collective practicality of the backstage with the individual creativity of the front without

[42]CW, 'The Culture of the Gang', *Freedom*, 6 June 1959; David Downes, correspondence with author.
[43]Stuart Hall, 'Raphael Samuel 1934–1996', 126.
[44]Ibid.
[45]Jeffrey Alexander, *The Drama of Social Life* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 107.
[46]Ibid.
[47]David Selbourne, 'The Last Comrade', *The Observer*, 15 December 1996, 24.
[48]Carolyn Steedman, 'Raphael Samuel 1934–1996', *Radical Philosophy* 82 (1997).

forfeiting unity altogether. To achieve this, he made a move from the intellectual-as-dramatist to the intellectual-as-dramaturge. Dramaturgy is notoriously ambiguous, but broadly it concerns how all the separate elements involved in making drama fuse together to make a whole.[49] Mercuriality defines the role, the dramaturge is indeed an unseen 'moving spirit' who, as Maaike Bleeker describes must have 'a way of looking that implies an eye for the possibilities inherent in the ideas and the material as well as well as an eye for their implications, their effects.'[50]

Samuel embodied this 'way of looking,' providing, in his own person, a point of intersection for the possibilities inherent in the ULR's ideas and material forms. His work in the ULR Clubs demonstrates this in action. Initially, he assumed the role of 'Club Secretary,' becoming 'Club Chairman' as the network expanded.[51] Whilst most personally active in the Soho branch, where he co-ordinated the speaker programme, he retained a general oversight of the network. In one sense, this was very direct. Prior to the first London club meeting in 1957, he organised a meeting of early subscribers at a café in Tottenham Court Road, recruiting them as 'stewards' who would circulate around the larger meetings.[52] In another, it was looser, his was given as the main corresponding address for all the club organisers.

Although accustomed to and adept at this sort of invisible work himself, he was fully aware of the value of heroes to inspire and galvanise, as his meticulous selection of writers for the magazine's first edition and speakers for the early club meetings showed. There was, however, an importance difference between a strategic use of figureheads – especially eloquent ones – at key moments, and the enduring intellectual work he considered would ultimately sustain such a pluralistic popular politics. This distinction crystalised in the first of several collisions he would have with EP Thompson.

From the beginning, there was an uneasy relationship between the two men. They were acquainted with one other through the CPGB and Samuel's friendship with Saville, Thompson's co-editor on the NR, but not previously close. Certainly, Thompson harboured reservations regarding the ULR's political project, writing to Samuel that he found the journal:

> sensational, rides loose to theory and principle, goes for gimmicks and so on: all this is excellent and the right way to break the crust especially with younger people. The NR is middle aged and paunchy and strikes a note of political responsibility, and dogged deaf endurance.[53]

The juxtaposition of lightness to weight, speed to slowness, made clear his view that the ULR lacked a degree of substance. Nevertheless, Thompson, a well-regarded figure in left circles, not least for his principled stand against the Party after Khrushchev, and active role in CND, was a natural choice to approach for a contribution to the first issue.

Thompson, no less than the ULR group, was preoccupied with redefining the left in the wake of Hungary, Suez, and the bomb, and one aspect of this that particularly concerned him was recuperating the socialist intellectual. For ex-Communists, part of the trauma of 1956 had been humiliation. Many, like Thompson, were intellectuals, joining the Party in the more clement atmosphere of Popular Frontism, attracted to what they considered to be a combination of an essentially moral egalitarian vision with a robust scientific analysis of political economy that appeared to justify it. Now, their authority to command public attention on this basis had been severely discredited. Communist intellectuals looked at best naïve, at worst, despotic. Kingsley Amis' Fabian pamphlet 'Socialism and the Intellectuals' (1957) salted the wound: the political intellectual, full of irrational romantic impulses, merely assumed the causes of others for want of having one of their own.[54]

[49]Magda Romanska, *The Routledge Handbook of Dramaturgy* (London: Routledge, 2016), 1.
[50]Maaike Bleeker, 'Dramaturgy as a Mode of Looking', *Women and Performance* 13, no. 2 (2003): 166.
[51]See'Acknowledgements' *Universities and Left Review* 2 (1957): 1; 'Acknowledgements' *Universities and Left Review* 3 (1958): 1.
[52]Written communication to author from Laurens Otter, one of the recruits, 11 January 2021. Transcript in author's collection. There were about one hundred stewards in total.
[53]E.P. Thompson, 'Letter to Raphael Samuel and Michael Barrett-Brown', 6 February 1957, RS.1: New Left/002, '1957, Raphael Samuel Archive, Bishopsgate Institute, London.
[54]Kingsley Amis, *Socialism and the Intellectuals* (London: Fabian Tracts 304, 1957).

Thompson used his contribution to the ULR first edition to confront Amis in his own polemic on 'Socialism and the Intellectuals.' Emphasising the intellectual as an individual, rather than a faceless member of a social group, he argued for their work as a matter of moral duty which, he claimed, was betrayed by retreating from public life:

> 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 […] but we continue our intellectual work because we believe that, in the last analysis ideas matter.[55]

The article sparked intense debate. Many objected that such Thompson's intellectual was positioned aloft and aloof from practical popular concerns. Where, they asked, and from which class, were these moral guardians going to come from?[56] For Taylor, the crux of the problem was that: 'to give the intellectuals the function of proclaiming values is to assume a harmonious set of values as already there waiting to be uncovered. This assumption just doesn't seem to me to be valid.' That Thompson did make this assumption, Taylor continued, only reinforced the problematic fusion of Marxism and Humanism in his thinking. It was not enough to denounce Stalinism as an aberration of Marxism without inspecting more closely the internal tensions within the latter. Nor was it sufficient to simply declare that moral ends could only be reached by moral means without applying more rigour to what the two terms meant.[57]

Samuel deliberately avoided becoming a direct combatant in the debate. Instead, he concealed his response in an innocuous 'Left Notebook' entry devoted to the ULR Clubs and tucked away at the back of the same issue. In reply to the recent discussions on intellectualism and the left he was pleased to report that:

> the splendid support which both Club and Review have received reflects a renewed awareness of the importance of socialist theory, of re-thinking, of socialism 'taken at full stretch, as relevant only in so far as it is relevant to the full scale of man's activities.' It reflects, too, a growing conviction that socialism imposed from above – whether by the halting and timid legislation of a Cabinet, or the ukase of a Party elite – is false socialism. To present either as socialism, realised, is increasingly seen as a libel on the socialist tradition.[58]

Still, he acknowledged, attempting to bring together all the very different components, and generations, of the left in a common conversation was far from easy. 'The problem' as he saw it, was not a matter of answers but 'that at times we are not really discussing the same questions at all.'

It was not a new theory that was needed but a new discursive culture in which the best of all the older left-wing traditions could be absorbed and the worse aspects dispensed with. Practically, this could be achieved by avoiding big subjects:

> In the present mood a discussion on, for example, socialism and the intellectual can easily degenerate into a discussion about politics, about everything. […] We want to channel this polemic into smaller study and discussion groups, and into material that will appear in the Review.[59]

This approach, he added, could be seen in the work of the groups on Town Planning, Education, and the Future of the Labour Movement.

Encouraging though these early signs had been, such a fundamental change would demand 'a dimension of tolerance, generosity and patience which has often been lacking on the Left.'[60] As chairman, he could cultivate this tolerance by mediating group discussion. For example, he advised the Contemporary Capitalism group not 'to counter Crosland's arguments with the charge that they

[55]E.P. Thompson, 'Socialism and the Intellectuals', *Universities and Left Review* 1 (1957): 31–6.
[56]Mervyn Jones, 'Socialism and the Intellectuals – One', *Universities and Left Review* 2 (1957): 15–16; Harold Silver, 'Socialism and the Intellectuals – Two', *Universities and Left Review* 2 (1957): 16–17; Rodney Hilton, 'Socialism and the Intellectuals – Four', *Universities and Left Review* 2 (1957): 20–2.
[57]Charles Taylor, 'Socialism and the Intellectuals – Three', *Universities and Left Review* 2 (1957): 18–19.
[58]Ralph Samuel and Charles Taylor, 'A Left Notebook', *Universities and Left Review* 2 (1957): 79–80.
[59]Ibid., 80.
[60]Ibid., 79.

are "not socialist": Left arguments must be underpinned by a more compelling documentation and argument.'[61] Another technique was to continually restate the group's broader aims so, for instance, the town planning group had to keep its focus on synthesising 'the work of town planners, architects, sociologists, economists and councillors in an attempt to recapture and carry forward the radical vision of the early post-war period.'[62] Through deftly blocking off discursive cul-de-sacs and repeated affirmation of shared goals, he could keep things flowing and sustain a sense of purpose without appealing to an external authority, whether moral or theoretical.

At no point in this short piece did he ever prescribe the work of the Club Chair, he simply performed it, extending the show beyond the content of his writing to its form, a 'Left Notebook.' In contrast with the grand, combative style of Thompson's polemical lead article, Samuel's back page notebook was friendly, and informal. Where the former, with its powerful writing and withering disdain for its opponents, made a bold display of confident certainty,[63] the latter was modest and earnest, a space where doubts, failures, unfinished thoughts could be safely confessed and recorded. Samuel's objection to Thompson, then, was less *what* he said about the socialist intellectual than *how* he had said it, and here the division between the NR and the ULR cohorts becomes clear. For the latter, all that made Thompson so iconic, his firm moral conviction, expressed through often bellicose eloquence, could not, ironically, create the sort of direct democracy he called for. He retained the privilege of determining, adjudicating, and articulating both moral ends and moral means.

5. Conclusion

Following the merger of the NR and the ULR into the NLR in 1960, the intensity of Samuel's involvement declined. With an enlarged editorial board, his scope for spontaneous action (in other words, pursuing his objectives regardless of opposition), was reduced. Moreover, as discussed above, there were profound divisions of opinion between the two cohorts which led to protracted internal disputes. In 1962 Hall, weary of the in-fighting, resigned his position as editor-in-chief. For Samuel, three years of balancing so many components finally caught up with him and he suffered a major breakdown, saved by a timely appointment as sociology tutor at Ruskin College, Oxford (an adult education college traditionally affiliated with the Trade Unions).[64] Editorship of the NLR now fell to Anderson who promptly took it off in the theoretical direction he considered necessary.

As Davis has shown, the standard criticisms of the first NL stemming from Anderson fail to appreciate how, from the start, the ULR explicitly sought to challenge the idea that theoretical coherence and structural permanence were necessary preconditions for effective political action. Believing that any deferral of individual liberty, even in the name of equality, led only to tyranny, they set out to reconcile the two by demonstrating their interdependence. If equality and liberty had always to be pursued in tandem, the ways of thinking about, and judging, political action had also to change. Rather than a unified theory, ideas in loose association. Instead of permanent parties, fissiparous networks. In place of an epic finale, open-ended improvisation in which men and women played many parts.

But, to fully appreciate the significance of this change, it is necessary to make a similar adjustment to the methods of analysis used to discern and assess political activity. A politics of practice must, by definition, be judged on what is done as much as what is said should be done. Thompson and, in a different way, Hall, were extremely eloquent commentators but, in many respects, they remained conventional political intellectuals.[65] Thompson especially belonged to a long tradition of public moralists who took for granted their cultural authority to speak and be listened

[61]Ibid., 80.
[62]Ibid.
[63]Jonathan Ree, 'A Theatre of Arrogance', *Times Higher Educational Supplement*, 5 June 1995.
[64]Brian Harrison, 'Interview with Raphael Samuel', 23 October 1979, Spitalfields, London, transcripts in author's collection.
[65]See Richard Taylor, *English Radicalism in the Twentieth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).

to.[66] This is why Samuel offers a better case study for understanding the ULR's activist politics. Quite simply, he, more than any of the other main NL organisers, put into practice what was preached.

Taking it, then, on these terms, how successful was the ULR's activist politics, how much active participation did it generate? The journal brought previously marginalised issues, especially in the field of culture, into fruitful, but not over-determined, dialogue with the traditional socialist concerns for political economy. The club concept was easy to adapt, and clubs multiplied easily. The topic-specific working groups not only allowed people to move across issues according to their interests but, operating on a small, inter-personal scale, permitted participants a sense of real involvement in the shaping of their proceedings.

Still there were problems which severely undermined the full realisation of the objectives. The organisational structure had potential but remained heavily saturated in bookish student socialism, obscuring the relevance of the clubs to anyone not already involved in left wing politics at a university. The initial plan of targeting existing student Labour and Socialist clusters as a primary audience exacerbated this. Whilst, on the surface, such an approach had the practical benefit of tapping into an existing network infrastructure, the groups brought with them all the baggage of inherited identities, loyalties, and feuds. As Samuel's reports on the Soho working groups showed, when confronted with complexity or disagreement, group members reverted to stock types, dismissing as 'not socialist' what they could not make agree with their existing preferences. The result was that the popular politics the ULR aspired to was often reduced to uneasy alliances amongst student factions, and the plurality they embraced was less constructive conflict than it was the sum of warring parts.

The Notting Hill club was another example of the ULR's limitations in attempting to engage with an emerging, post-industrial working class outside of the universities, especially the problems grasping the distinct implications created by factors like race. As Hall said of Notting Hill, 'an underground diasporic colony life was beginning to flourish … a black expressive culture,'[67] very different from his own social and political milieu, and one he would pursue through theory and his work at the Centre of Contemporary Culture Studies at the University of Birmingham.

Samuel, by contrast, discovered 'what socialist work was really about' through teaching at Ruskin.[68] Here, he recognised that empowering people meant more than engineering opportunities which – in all reality – only a privileged few were ever going to be able to seize, but in first cultivating the expectation that one should be a cultural producer and, second, in sharing the skills required to realise that desire. This insight underpinned the formation of the early History Workshop which began with the aim of making working class people into producers, rather than consumers, of their own history.[69] Later, he extended it into his work on public memory and heritage where he acknowledged the potential – and also limitations – of everyday acts of history making in late twentieth century British popular culture.[70] Each new iteration of this project produced small gains and as many new problems, but problems do not automatically amount to failure. In fact, the restless interplay of ideas and pragmatics only underlined his belief that the curtain never falls on socialism. In the end, it was always a work-in-progress.

Disclosure statement

[66]Scott Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory: EP Thompson, the New Left and Post War British Politics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011).

[67]Stuart Hall, *Familiar Stranger: A Life Between Two Islands* (London: Penguin, 2017), 259–60.

[68]Brian Harrison, 'Interview with Raphael Samuel', 23 October 1979, Spitalfields, London, transcripts in author's collection.

[69]Raphael Samuel, 'General Editor's Introduction', in *Village Life and Labour*, ed. R. Samuel (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), xx.

[70]Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory* (London: Verso, 1994).

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