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The London Consortium and Me: Memoir of an Experiment in Doctoral Education

Like many Consortiumites of my generation, I joined the London Consortium under the spell of Steve Connor. I made my way down Malet Street from UCL, where I was studying for an MA in English Literature, to Steve's office in Birkbeck College. It was Jane Lewty who had pointed me in Steve's direction. 'He's a sound guy', she said. I only later realised that she was referring to his interest in sound studies, but the warmth of her recommendation had made an impression on me.

The two immediately striking aspects of the London Consortium, as Steve described it to me during my admissions interview, were its commitment to interdisciplinarity and its unusual meta-institutional shape. Interdisciplinarity was not quite, in 2004, the near-mandatory AHRC and REF buzzword it has since become. It appealed to me as a student who loved novels and films and philosophy and history and sociological theories, and who was turned off by a strand of Eng. Lit. piety that made literature into a holy object. I had enjoyed my time at UCL, and the tutorial system gave me the freedom to write essays on Public Enemy, *Back to the Future*, Marxism and so on – though of course these were hardly the set texts on UCL's BA in English Language and Literature. It was only during my PhD that my supervisor Colin MacCabe would introduce me to the work of Raymond Williams, but that 'culture is ordinary' I knew instinctively.¹ And at its best the Consortium lived out the promise of that ambiguous phrase.

The tone was set by the courses which each cohort of Consortium students took together, whether enrolled on the PhD or the MRes.² That was a group of somewhat over thirty students in my year. Each course was co-taught by (at least) two people, normally with different disciplinary formations. On 'Metamorphosis from Ovid to Cronenberg', taught by Steve and Colin, we'd study *A Midsummer Night's Dream* one week (the Shakespeare play and the Britten opera), because culture – including the 'high' or difficult culture which English studies said was good for us, if approached with the appropriate degree of moral seriousness –

was ordinary and available for analysis without the need for prior induction into Shakespeare Studies or opera criticism. Another week, we'd study *The Fly* because horror films are culture too and warrant attention. Now, you face obvious limitations, when you're called to an analysis of Britten's opera, if you know nothing about the history of opera and its criticism. But I remember Steve emphasising that this ignorance also gave you a special kind of epistemological advantage over opera specialists: someone trained in film studies would be able to see things that might pass a musicologist by. If this seems dilettantish, it wasn't meant to be: the Consortium ethos was always to follow the defamiliarising effect of that initial encounter with a deeper engagement with specialised knowledge. Interdisciplinarity was too often merely superficial, and we wanted to do it more thoroughly: to learn to understand and even to inhabit the norms and procedures of different disciplines, not just to sample the cultural objects over which they claimed their monopolies.

Interdisciplinary encounters continued in subsequent years of the PhD programme, when students attended a weekly work in progress seminar during term, led in my time by Barry Curtis, Patrick Wright, Aura Satz, Colin MacCabe and others. As is widely known, it is extremely difficult to get PhD students to turn up to a seminar that's not at least fairly close to their field. We turned up – at least in sufficient numbers to keep the seminar viable. We discussed an art history paper one week, philosophy the next, film studies ... My own attempts to bring together architectural history, film studies and literary criticism were read and discussed by students from across a range of disciplines. The notion was that someone from outside your field is perfectly placed to test the assumptions you might have unwittingly inherited from it; 'Why on earth would you think like that?' was a question the structure was designed to encourage. On the other hand, there was also a frequent recourse to comments that took the form 'what about x?' or 'have you seen y?': the seminar was not only for the interrogation of first principles, it also operated as a space of accretion, in which the student could build a rich palate of examples from across a wide range of cultural forms. The peers I learned most from, during my PhD and after, were working in all sorts of areas: Richard Osborne on the history of the vinyl record; Stephen Sale on Friedrich Kittler; Ricarda Vidal on car crash culture; Ben Dawson on Romantic scientific thought; Katherine Hunt on bells in the English Reformation; Martine Rouleau and Seph Rodney on galleries and audiences (a significant strand of the Consortium's work); Francis Gooding on nature and history; Lina Hakim on scientific instruments; Alice Honor Gavin on free indirect style; Bernard Vere on

the faltering steps of the avant-garde in England; Oli Harris on myth in psychoanalysis.

This was a cultural studies that was to some extent oriented against the official version institutionalised in the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham. For one thing, the Consortium resisted what might be thought of as the presentism of the CCCS. Each suite of four or five Consortium courses included one that involved sustained reflection on the ancient world. In my year it was 'Stoicism', taught by Richard Humphries, Denise Riley and John Sellers – later iterations included 'Antigone' and 'Saint Paul'. PhD projects similarly ranged across different periods. Again, the emphasis was on defamiliarising our own assumptions – what could seem further from the ideas and attitudes of contemporary public life than stoicism? The public reaction to the death of Princess Diana – still relatively fresh – was invoked as exemplary. Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius and Seneca offered a vantage point from which to see contemporary cultural mores from the outside.

It wasn't just the presentism of the Birmingham Centre that was rejected by the Consortium. As Francis Mulhern argued in a pointed critique of CCCS, there was a feeling (on the economic Second New Left, from where Mulhern wrote, but perhaps not only there) that cultural studies had degenerated into a depoliticised populism, creating a reverse hierarchy in which popular culture always trumped 'elitist' pursuits.³ Cultural studies had started with Williams's critique of the very idea of the 'mass'. 'There are in fact no masses; there are only ways of seeing people as masses', he wrote.⁴ For Mulhern, the CCCS (at least in its later phase) had ironically revived the idea of an unthinking mass, incapable of intellectual activity, in order to identify with it. A hedonistic immersion in popular culture started to be seen as a viable replacement for formal politics. The Consortium response (as I understand it) was not an Adorno-inspired retrenchment in high, difficult, or modernist culture. The Consortium remained programmatically open to the analysis of popular culture, on the basis that it was not stupid or purely hedonistic: popular culture, too, thinks.

If Mulhern articulated his critique of CCCS from the perspective of a politicised Marxism, that was never the Consortium emphasis (though more or less everyone involved was on the left). Of course, politics was never far away, and we often sought economic, political and psychological explanations for cultural phenomena in ways that would have seemed familiar enough to leftist academics in all their varieties. Marx and Freud hovered in the background, feminist and postcolonial critiques were often articulated and discussed. The postmodernist star

system had not yet waned, so Derrida, Deleuze, Kristeva and Žižek were in there too. Yet there was a revisionist spirit in the air: we took for granted that grand theories of culture were provisional and limited. The mantra – disputed of course by some – was ‘objects before theories’. To write an essay or a PhD thesis was not to apply a pre-agreed methodology systematically to a set of objects. It was a daring feat of bricolage that depended on your capacity for improvisation and derring-do. ‘Joyful knowledge’ was a phrase I heard a lot. There was a good-humoured intolerance for the pious and the po-faced: if you weren’t having fun on some level, why waste your time on it? But joyful knowledge came from being serious about the things you were interested in. Steve liked to quote Philip Larkin’s ‘Church Going’ – the Consortium was a group of people brought together by ‘a hunger ... to be more serious’. Did we contradict ourselves?

It may be that I arrived after the unifying political thinker had sadly departed. I enrolled only a few years after the death of Paul Hirst, who was instrumental in founding the Consortium, its first Academic Director, and an inspirational teacher to many I knew. Mark Cousins, whose Friday evening lectures at the Architectural Association provided a social and intellectual hub for the Consortium’s students (and who himself sadly died in 2020), described a common project in his obituary for Hirst:

From the start we agreed that we were opposed to the increasingly extreme relativism of a lot of cultural studies, not because we were indifferent to the difference between cultures or groups, but because we thought that this relativism had led to increasing intellectual and political demobilisation. Despite the turn of politics in general, the particular evolution of all three of us [Cousins, Hirst and MacCabe] from an early Maoism, through Althusser and into social democracy, brought us together.⁵

I remember Mark, in a lecture, calling for a ‘militant social democracy’, clearly inspired by Hirst’s influential models of associational democracy developed in the 1990s. Why do the political extremes get the monopoly on militancy, Mark wanted to know? While Hirst’s thought, sceptical as it was of the claims of state collectivism, has occasionally been credited with providing intellectual impetus to New Labour, its emphasis on democratisation and autonomous self-governance was a good place from which to mount a critique of Blair’s sofa government.

Marxism supplied a number of valuable analytic tools (and a Consortium reading group worked its way through *Capital* when I was there),

but we were asked to be clear-eyed about its deficiencies. For Mark the Holocaust was a defining event that resisted Marxist explanation. ‘Kant’s Ethics and a Modern Economy of Evil’, a module Mark co-taught with Parveen Adams and Sam Ashenden, traced ideas of evil from Kant through Arendt to Badiou, and the Holocaust was a key instance. I arrived late for Mark’s lecture on Primo Levi, during which he cried. I was on time for a screening of Pasolini’s *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* at the ICA: Parveen was keen that the group watch the film together in case anyone was overwhelmed by the sadism on screen. Mark fell asleep during the film and quipped impishly afterwards ‘sleep is the defence; snoring is the critique’. In the Consortium, comedy and melodrama were not external to intellectual inquiry, but legitimate varieties of it.

It’s a mood I don’t find in the contemporary university in 2022. I don’t think it could readily be found in universities in 2005 either, as we often reminded ourselves. One encountered within the Consortium various levels of hostility to the universities, somewhat depending on whom you talked to. This was perhaps a corollary of the Consortium’s unusual multi-institutional structure – somewhat outside of and independent from the University, even while parasitically dependent on it. The Consortium was, in a certain sense, a counterinstitution. Teaching happened in any of the four constituent institutions: Birkbeck, the ICA, the Architectural Association or Tate (the BFI had left, the Science Museum was yet to join). Many of the people who taught me (including Denise Riley, Patrick Wright, Philip Dodd, Parveen Adams) had dipped in and out of universities in the course of varied careers. Colin seemed to work in several at the same time – I think when I enrolled, he was a professor at both Exeter and Pittsburgh, still finding enormous resources of time and energy for the Consortium. He had no London office, so supervisions were held in the Groucho Club, in Pizza Paradiso on Store Street or at his kitchen table in Islington. There’s an anecdote about PhD supervisions happening in the back of a black cab: even if this turns out to be apocryphal, it’s difficult to think of a more eloquent symbol of the London Consortium’s educational approach.

Students periodically complained about this absence of a fixed location. There was no row of doors along a university corridor behind which faculty members could reliably be found. But this lack of a physical home was also seen as an asset. We were encouraged to think of ourselves as a nomadic body of students, pulsating between nodes in a decentralised network, critiquing the hierarchy and bureaucracy of the universities from the democratic perspective of the Architectural Association bar, darting back across Bedford Square to Birkbeck to look

askance at the latest branding exercise by Tate (definite article banned from all marketing materials).

Still, we were Birkbeck students, as I am proud to say. Of all the teachers, Steve was the most comfortable in the university, the least likely to loft a savage critique of higher education's creeping bureaucratisation. As I now understand more fully, Steve played a vital mediating role between the degree-awarding institution and the loose and heterogeneous association of intellectuals that educated the students. He steered the steering committee, kept Birkbeck happy, and kept the financial wheels turning. That the Consortium existed because of the imagination and generosity of Birkbeck College is now clear: one radical educational experiment begat another. I don't know all the details of how the finances worked but here is what I remember: Birkbeck took 20 per cent of the fee income, and gave 80 per cent to the Consortium, which effectively operated as a small business. Birkbeck also transferred significant sums to the Consortium from the HEFCE funding that followed every home PhD student. On the other side of the ledger, the Consortium rented an administrative office space, compensated Birkbeck for the salary of a (junior) replacement for the academic director and employed an administrator as well as (from 2008 when I became the first to take up the role) a part-time admissions director. There were annual payments of £5,000 to each of the partner institutions. The infrastructural overheads ended there. Supervisors, seminar leaders and steering committee members were paid on a freelance basis. We benefited from free use of bookable rooms at most of the partner institutions, borrowing rights in Birkbeck library and Senate House, and full access to student support and training offered by Birkbeck. There was money left over for quite a lot of well-catered parties. ('Instruction by party' was another Consortium slogan, although I think that one has a Birkbeck provenance.) In its heyday, the Consortium probably spent more on each student than any other graduate programme in England.

Now that I have joined the ranks of the Associate Deans, I can confidently say that any academic proposing such a scheme in my university would not get far with it. I can imagine raising certain objections myself. We heard some at the time – for example from PhD students at Birkbeck who paid the same fees but got no Tate or ICA memberships and fewer and less-well-catered parties. (Like us they learned from brilliant academics and friendly and supportive departments, which moreover – if this is your cup of tea – were firmly located in identifiable university buildings.) In our current political climate and at a difficult moment for higher education, I've become defensive about universities in ways that might have surprised 25-year-old Consortiumite me. I worry about

the costs of university infrastructure, of maintaining a decent library, of funding pension contributions and pay deals that keep pace with inflation. I wonder if some elements of the Consortium's counterinstitutional rhetoric would now ring a bit hollow.

I don't want to dwell on the Consortium's painful demise in 2012, though I witnessed it at close quarters: I'd graduated, and left my role as admissions tutor, but was still a member of the steering committee and attended a number of hair-raising crisis meetings in that capacity. The fact that the Consortium had been built on friendship made the breakup harder – I watched as the teachers I most admired fell into recriminations. It must have been unbearably difficult for the students who were still working on their PhDs, as the thriving programme in which they had enrolled effectively tore itself apart before disappearing completely. There are different accounts of the reasons for the Consortium's demise and I won't rehearse these here. Steve's departure, to take up a professorship at Cambridge, was (as I think everyone agrees) a precipitating factor – we lost our most eloquent spokesman as well as our most skilled administrator – but the underlying causes were, as they say, structural. Perhaps it is enough to say, with the benefit of a decade's historical perspective, that the shifting financial landscape of higher education as well as other institutional factors made it very difficult to sustain the Consortium in a form that would satisfy the students and staff involved.

I owe a lot to the London Consortium, to my supervisors and teachers, and to the friends I met there. I'm glad that the middle manager that my professional life requires me to be has to negotiate, occasionally, with the cheeky and truculent anarchist within. I think I'm a better academic because I was once a Consortiumite. Colin loved to say that the Consortium was like the Hotel California: 'you can check out any time you like but you can never leave'. I never left.

Notes

- 1 Raymond Williams, 'Culture is Ordinary', in *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism* (London: Verso, 1989), 3–14.
- 2 My subsequent training would lead me to call them core modules, but at the Consortium we called them courses.
- 3 Francis Mulhern, *Culture/Metaculture* (London: Routledge, 2000), 132–51.
- 4 Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: Coleridge to Orwell* (London: Hogarth Press, 1982), 300.
- 5 Mark Cousins, 'Paul Hirst and the London Consortium', *Open Democracy*, 15 July 2003; <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/1360/> (accessed 29 June 2022).