



BROWSE



Stuart Hall's Ethics

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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For Stuart

Increasingly, I think one of the main functions of concepts [like identity] is that they give us a good

night's rest. Because what they tell us is that there is a kind of stable, only very slowly changing ground inside the hectic upsets, discontinuities and ruptures of history. Around us history is constantly breaking in unpredictable ways but we, somehow, go on being the same.

—Stuart Hall

Here is the worry that animates much of Stuart Hall's work; one might call it his worry about "the solace of closure" (that phrase is his too).¹ It is a worry, I think, that shapes to a very considerable degree his intellectual *voice*—his style of thinking, his ethos of critical engagement. And *these* are what interest me. Stuart, I want to suggest, has cultivated an ethical voice responsive to the violations that grow out of complacent satisfactions, secure doctrines, congealed orders, sedimented identities. In this sense I read Stuart's practice *less* for its *cultural* criticism than for the guidance it gives in speaking *ethics* to politics. I read Stuart as a normative critic of normativity inasmuch as his style and his ethos urge us to *take positions*—not merely to disavow them. Stuart's **[End Page 1]** ethics, I am going to argue more specifically, are *dialogical* ethics. By this I mean that his ethics are not rule-following ethics of the rationalist or Kantian sort in which what counts is mastery of the moral law as the guarantee of sovereign identity. Rather Stuart's ethics are *founded in* and *shaped by* responsiveness to alterity, to the opacities of otherness, and to the unavoidable risks and ineluctable uncertainties haunting any dialogical encounter, and any hope of belonging-in-difference.

We live in Dark Times. They are not times that favor forbearance, they do not shelter generosity, they do not encourage receptivity. They are, rather, obdurate times, cynically triumphalist and ruthlessly xenophobic times that seem to require a new routine of silencing and assimilation, a new regime of prostration, submission, and humiliation. Who, looking forward from a generation ago, in the middle of another imperial moment, could have imagined they would be living in a world that looks like this one? But Dark Times, as Hannah Arendt memorably said, need people who can give us illumination—and calls them forth into the public realm.² These are not people who speak to us with feckless sentimentality, who are interested in saving our souls. They are people whose vocation of dissent enables us to glimpse some possibility in ourselves and in others hitherto obscured by the priority we give to the solace of a good night's rest. This is what, to me anyway, Stuart's voice is, in all the recursive iterations in which I have had the good fortune to hear it: illumination for Dark Times.

For the sake of keeping me focused and tidy in what follows, the reflections I offer are organized around three distinct but I think inseparable dimensions of what I take to be Stuart's way of practicing the intellectual life. To begin with, I take up the question of the sense or senses in which Stuart Hall is, preeminently, a theorist of the *present* and of the present's contingency. I will emphasize that for Stuart respecting contingency is less an orientation toward Truth per se, than responsiveness to an ethics of action. Next, I take up Stuart's relation to the question of discipline and theory, and inquire some way into what I take to be his particular *evasion* of the voice and ambition of Philosophy. I argue that this has implications for an ethics of knowing, broadly speaking, and for the way **[End Page 2]** Stuart thinks the question of the African diaspora, more specifically. Finally, I end by considering the ethics of receptive generosity I find at work in Stuart's conceptualization of identity. Stuart's fundamentally *ethical* stance as an engaged intellectual, I will suggest, is illuminated...

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1. The epigraph is taken from Stuart Hall, "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities," in *Culture, Globalization, and the World System*, ed. Anthony D. King (London: Macmillan, 1996), 43. On the "solace of closure," see, for example, Stuart Hall, "On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall," in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (New York: Routledge, 1996), 137.

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