When Richard Lloyd Jones came to look back on his wartime school days at Long Dene, a progressive boarding school in Buckinghamshire, one particular incident stuck in his mind.¹ He remembered being kept awake during the hot summer of 1944. It was not the heat alone that was responsible for this. Nor was there any particular physical reason why he should have been so wakeful. Part of the school’s ethos was a strenuous emphasis on the pupils participating in forms of outdoor and rural work such as harvesting. All that fresh air and exercise should have been quite sufficient to exhaust even the most active of small boys. What kept Richard Lloyd Jones awake was the incessant talking of a young, hyperactive ‘Raf-Sam’. Lloyd Jones did not recall exactly what it was that so animated the juvenile Samuel, late into that sticky summer’s night, but a reasonable assumption would be that it was politics, specifically communist politics, as the nine-year-old Samuel was already practising his skills as an aspiring communist propagandist and organiser.²

¹ Lloyd Jones later became Permanent Secretary for Wales (1985–93) and Chairman for the Arts Council of Wales (1994–99).
Raphael Samuel, Croftdown Road, London, c. 1945
As this anecdote suggests, Ralph or Raf, as he was then known, was already precociously political and steeped in Communist Party culture. This chapter explores the specific configurations of that youthful political commitment, arguing that it was multidimensional in nature, encompassing both conscious adherence to the party line but also an entire array of practices and values that were perceived less directly.

During this period of his youth (1934–52), the official party line changed several times. First founded in 1920, by end of the decade the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) had adopted the uncompromising stance of 'class against class', which remained largely intact until the transition to Popular Frontism in 1935. Following the Nazi–Soviet pact in 1939, this was replaced by an Imperial War policy, compelling party members to reject the Allied war effort. After the collapse of the pact in 1941, Social Patriotism renewed the spirit of Popular Front and saw membership numbers increase substantially. Following the war, the party entered a difficult period with the escalation of Cold War hostilities and tensions mounting amongst the national branches. In 1951, the CPGB announced its commitment to The British Road to Socialism through alliance with domestic progressive forces. The depth of this commitment, however, remains a matter for debate.

As critical as these shifts were in sculpting the formal landscape of Samuel’s communism, this chapter contends that for the child it was communism as direct experience, an entire way of life incorporating a set of values translated into behavioural norms and practices in day-to-day life that was important.

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5 A point echoed by his uncle, Chimen Abramsky, in his tribute to his nephew following Samuel’s death in 1996: ‘As a result of the rise of fascism in Europe and the Second World War many Jews joined the communist movement. This had a major influence on the young Raphael. He absorbed many communist ideas on equality’. Abramsky reinforced this point later in the article, adding: ‘There was more of William Godwin and Robert Owen in him, than of Marx and Engels’. ‘Raphael Samuel’, The Jewish Chronicle, 17 January 1997.
Communism as a way of life

Samuel was born on 26 December 1934, in North London, to Minna and Barnett Samuel, part of an extended Jewish family. Minna, born Minnie, was the daughter of Jacob and Fanny Nerenstein who had migrated to England from Grodno, Polish Russia, at the turn of century. Once in England, they had settled in the East End of London, where Minna was born in 1906 followed by two younger sisters, Miriam and Sarah. Here the family ran a bookshop and publishing house specialising in Jewish literature, Shapiro Valentine & Co. on Wentworth Street, East London. She married Barnett Samuel (1906–1971), a London solicitor from an orthodox Jewish family, in 1931 and moved to Hampstead Garden Suburb in North London. The marriage was short-lived, the couple separated in 1941 when Samuel was not quite seven years old, later divorcing in 1946. Minna raised Samuel, their only child. On returning to London following evacuation during the war, mother and son lived in Kentish Town, North London.6

The single most-defining feature of Samuel’s early upbringing was communist politics, which dominated every aspect of his young life and burgeoning consciousness. His communist childhood was the subject of some of his most powerful pieces of historical writing, in particular his series of essays on ‘The Lost World of British Communism’ published in the New Left Review during the mid-1980s.7 Historian and ex-communist John Saville criticised the essays, arguing that Samuel’s communism was of a highly particular, even peculiar, kind, far from representative of a broader experience:

I do not deny the validity of Raphael Samuel’s own personal history, especially in his younger days … The historian in him, however, might have acknowledged that it was a very unusual story, typical of some, perhaps many, Jewish comrades but not in any way relevant to the working-class militants who were joining the Communist Party at the time that Raphael was growing up in the 1940s.8

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7 All references to Lost World are taken from the 2006 publication of these essays as a book: The Lost World of British Communism (London: Verso, 2006).
Saville may have intended this remark as a criticism, but in fact, this was the very point that Samuel was attempting to make in *Lost World*, a rejection of the idea that any sort of uniform experience of communist politics actually existed, that it always entailed a close and complex relationship with other factors, his own experience was not only that of a Jewish comrade, but also that of a child brought up by a single mother, of a Londoner during the war years. Above all, it must be understood as a communism shaped and mediated by the values implied by Popular Front politics.

In 1935, at the Seventh International Congress (a meeting of all national Communist Party branches), Georgi Dimitrov, the General Secretary of Comintern, announced the official transition towards a policy of Popular Front to be effective immediately amongst all the national branches. Suddenly, from strict adherence to a narrowly prescribed class politics, party members were compelled to seek alliance with a broad spectrum of progressive forces. The switch to the Popular Front had been prompted in part by the catastrophic fate that had befallen the Communist Party of Germany that, too politically isolated to oppose Adolf Hitler’s attacks, had been wiped off the German political spectrum and rendered powerless. Now Dimitrov urged the respective national branches of the Communist Party to collaborate, not just joining forces with other left-wing or centrist political groups such as the British Labour or Liberal parties, but also showing a willingness to cooperate with any social or cultural group who were opposed to fascism. He also stressed the importance of reclaiming national histories for the political left. The invocation of a lost national past was a recurrent feature in fascist rhetoric, a tactic that had proved gallingly effective as a form of psychological propaganda.

Amongst the CPGB, there had always been some uneasiness with the implications of the ‘class against class’ policy, so the notion of a united or Popular Front was greeted with relative consensus amongst the party’s

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The Popular Front, as it emerged in Britain, was also culturally familiar. As David Blaazer has argued, similar alliances amongst progressive forces, including the fledgling Labour Party, appeared in response to the Boer War (1899–1901) and again to the First World War (1914–18). In 1935, many of these forces, in particular those amongst the Labour Party retained an attitude of deep suspicion, even hostility towards the communists. Mistrustful of the CPGB’s loyalty and claim to desire working-class unity within the framework of the Labour Party, it rejected overtures towards a united front.

The CPGB was more successful in its engagement with grassroots initiatives that emerged during this period, from which it would previously have remained aloof. One example of this was the Left Book Club (LBC), run by the charismatic editor Victor Gollancz, who whilst never a party member held communist sympathies. Intent upon revitalising an ailing popular left-wing movement, the LBC became one of the most effective methods of circulating left-orientated literature to a wide audience. Similarly, communists were also able to collaborate in campaigns such as Aid in Spain (Samuel later recalled that it was her frustration with the Labour Party’s position on the Spanish Civil War that first turned his mother further towards the radical end of the political spectrum).

Strategically, the CPGB’s switch proved successful, resulting in a substantial increase in its membership, peaking during the war at 56,000.

Popular Frontism had been a pragmatic policy change and was, broadly speaking, successful in its execution. Nevertheless, its implications raised significant problems not only within the alliances but amongst the CPGB itself. The critical issue here was on the extent to which the shift undermined the focus on class and even, as the threat of war turned to reality, obscured it altogether. One symptom of this unease could be
discerned in the relationship with the intellectuals who joined the party following the transition charged with playing a key role in a battle of ideas. For many within the party’s internal hierarchy, the intellectual represented a quintessentially bourgeois figure. In September 1932, Rajani Palme Dutt (the CPGB’s chief ideologue) could still write expressing deep suspicion of intellectuals:

[T]here is no special work and role for Communists from the bourgeois intellectual strata … The intellectual who has joined the Communist Party … should forget that he is an intellectual (except in moments of necessary self criticism) and remember that he a Communist.17

Whilst events might have forced a public revision of such a stance, the wariness, even hostility, expressed by Dutt (who remained a senior figure in the party throughout this time) remained.

One of the major informing factors for the increase in party membership following the transition was the perceived insufficiency of the official political response to the threat posed by the rise of the European fascist parties.18 Throughout the 1930s, the British Government pursued an official policy stance of appeasement in its foreign relations with Germany, which many (including several members of the main political parties) found to be at best ineffectual or at worst wilfully blind in its underestimation of the threat of fascism. The uncompromising, anti-fascist stance taken by the CPGB, as a party, stood in stark contrast to the more ambiguous, or less equivocal, positions taken by other established political parties.

For a culturally Jewish family like Samuel’s, a further consideration was that certain strands of fascism were anti-Semitic.Whilst Britain was never in the grip of state fascism, as Spain, Germany and Italy were, there were some smaller-scale domestic examples to provide a chilling insight. In 1934, former MP Oswald Mosley formed the British Union of Fascists (BUF) who adopted a hostile stance towards ethnic minority groups, including Anglo-Jewish communities. In September 1936,

18 Scott Hamilton and Peter Conradi both argue that this factor was critical for Frank Thompson and, to a lesser extent, E.P. Thompson’s decision to join the party. Scott Hamilton, The Crisis of Theory: E.P. Thompson, the New Left and Post War British Politics (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012); Peter Conradi, A Very English Hero: The Making of Frank Thompson (London: Bloomsbury, 2012).
the BUF attempted to march through Cable Street in East London where a significant proportion of the population were Jewish. Angry protestors confronted the BUF, resulting in a pitched street battle and the abandonment of the planned march.19

The CPGB were active in organising the protest, offering those frustrated with what they perceived as indecisiveness on the part of community leaders (often divided amongst themselves on matters of both politics and religion) an assertive alternative form of leadership.20 As Samuel’s uncle, the scholar and historian Chimen Abramsky, said later, ‘if you were for democracy Communism was the place to go’.21

There were obvious contradictions in this view of the party. It was, for example, complicit in the suppression of the Independent Worker’s Party of Marxist Unification and of the Anarchist factions in the Spanish civil war. In Britain, the party’s newspaper, The Daily Worker, made a robust public defence of the Moscow trials.22 The Nazi–Soviet non-aggression pact (August 1939) prompted an official party line of imperialist war, compelling loyal CPGB members to sabotage war efforts, particularly in the factories. This was only altered following the Soviet Union’s entry into the war in June 1941 and the restoration of ‘Social Patriotism’.23

Most of this would have passed the young Samuel by. He was four and a half when the party line changed in 1939, six and a half when it changed again in 1941. These shifts, however, did have significance for the CPGB members amongst his immediate family who provided the critical means through which his early politics took shape. His mother, Minna, for example, was a pivotal figure in shaping his initial

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22  The Moscow trials took place between 1936 and 1938. Four prominent Bolshevik party figures were condemned for espionage, part of a wider process in which ordinary Russians were systematically imprisoned, tortured or murdered in unimaginable numbers all legally sanctioned by the state. Eaden and Renton, The Communist Party of Great Britain since 1920, 60–68.
sense of politics. Her enduring influence on him is most evident in his autobiographical writing in which she is a central figure, depicted in a tone that, whilst not uncritical, was always very affectionate. From the outset, Minna’s communism was both an outlet for her natural energies and dynamism but also a means of escaping from what she regarded as her life’s restrictions.

Minna had been raised in a deeply observant Jewish household, speaking Yiddish as her first language. She was a bright child, winning a scholarship to Clapton Country Secondary School run by Mrs Harris, a progressive Fabian Socialist. She quickly proved herself to be a talented musician strongly influenced by the Jewish folk music passed on to her through the Synagogue and by her uncle Leibel, a self-taught violinist. Her talent took her to study at the Royal Academy of Music, but she was forced to quit her music studies in order to help run the family business following the death of her father Jacob in 1926. In 1931 she married Barnett Samuel, a young solicitor from an orthodox Jewish family and moved to Hampstead Garden Suburb, North London, where she quickly found the genteel environs of the suburb claustrophobic after the bustle of the East End.

Politics offered Minna activity and intellectual stimulation. She joined the Hampstead Garden Suburb Labour Party, becoming secretary of the women’s group. Together with Barnett she formed a committee for refugee children from Germany, throwing herself wholeheartedly into the venture, seized and driven by the urgency of the situation. Barnett, a far less effusive personality, drew back at this whirlwind of activity, causing a rift to open up between them. Minna’s radicalism increased through her work on Spanish Aid. Disappointed in the Labour Party’s policy on Spain, she drifted further towards the radical left. In 1939 she followed her younger sisters in joining the CPGB, a move that precipitated the eventual breakdown of her marriage to Barnett in 1941.

Communism, with its levelling concept of comrade, allowed Minna to escape the confines of the ghetto, the suburb and married life. She threw herself into party life with gusto, becoming a progress chaser in an aircraft factory and later the key organiser of the large Slough branch of the CPGB. At different times she assumed the roles of literature secretary,

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24 Hampstead Garden Suburb was the brainchild of the social reformer Henrietta Barnett who had envisaged a community of mixed social classes living together in pleasant green surroundings.

If his mother’s influence was characterised by activism then that of his uncle, Chimen Abramsky, was defined by its deep intellectualism. Abramsky was born in Minsk, Russia, in 1916, the son of Yehezkel Abramsky, a rabbi and gifted Talmudic scholar. The young Abramsky received little formal schooling but had a procession of private tutors, later becoming a student at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. During a visit to family in London, he became stranded by the outbreak of the Second World War. Taking a job in Shapiro Valentine & Co., Abramsky met and married Miriam Nerenstein, Minna’s younger sister and Samuel’s aunt. Abramsky joined the party in 1941, becoming the ‘patriarch’ of the family’s communism.

Abramsky was a renowned bibliophile, extraordinarily widely read and learned. He was meticulous in his scholarship, an expert in socialist and Jewish history, a lively conversationalist and a compelling teacher. Samuel’s aunt, Miriam Abramsky, was equally strong in her political convictions but preferred to express them through her warm and welcoming hospitality. The Abramsky’s modest London household provided a second home for Samuel as he was growing up. It also provided an intellectual haven for a steady stream of scholars, intellectuals and leading political and religious figures, all of whom came to engage in intense political and philosophical debate that would often carry on late into the night. For all the gravity and passionate nature of the discussion, this was also a house of laughter, friendship and fun.\footnote{Rapaport-Albert, ‘Chimen Abramsky Obituary’; Rapaport-Albert, ‘Professor Chimen Abramsky: Historian’, \textit{The Times}, 19 March 2010; Samuel, \textit{The Lost World}, 63; Peter Dreier, ‘The House of Twenty Thousand Books’ by Sasha Abramsky’, Huffington Post, 8 June 2014, www.huffingtonpost.com/peter-dreier/the-house-of-twenty-thousand-books_b_5467086.html (accessed June 2014); Sasha Abramsky, \textit{The House of Twenty Thousand Books} (London: Halden Publishers, 2014); Sasha Abramsky, ‘The House of Twenty Thousand Books’, 6 June 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=h37Gf-aw0fE&feature=youtu.be (accessed June 2014).}
In his later writing, Samuel respectfully acknowledged the intellectual and emotional debt owed to his uncle, but this acknowledgement did not carry the same warmth that animated the descriptions of his mother.\(^{27}\) Equally, Abramsky’s tribute to his nephew, following his death in 1996, was similarly reserved in some of its judgements, describing his nephew as a ‘Narodnik’ in his personal manners, implying the prevalence of a romantic utopianism in his political ideas and activities.\(^{28}\) These subtleties in tone suggest his attraction to and admiration for activism. Abramsky’s deep intellectualism could be, at times, a point of division between the two men. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the young Samuel was exposed early to complex subject matters and spoken to by adults with great frankness in an atmosphere that was also profoundly sociable.

So far, this chapter has discussed the significance of the Popular Front in relation to the political culture of 1930s Britain, the connection between the family’s Jewish background and their political commitment, and the nature of the political commitment and activity exhibited by key individual members of his family. All of these were important and informing factors in shaping his youthful politics, but it is equally important to acknowledge the distinctive features of his individual experience.

Unlike the older members of his family, he was born into communism. Later, as a historian and left-wing intellectual, he would become aware of the broader political and conceptual contexts in which this was situated. It was first received, however, as a child, a highly distinctive physical and psychological developmental stage from that of an adult. Saville’s critique of the *Lost World* essays as an ‘incoherent personal sociology’, might, in another light, be more rewardingly seen as communism from a ‘child’s eye view’, encountered not as a theory of political economy that carried consequences for the daily lives of adherents but in terms of a series of direct, first-hand experiences and perceptions.\(^{29}\)

In the first place, Samuel’s communism was a real family affair. Not only Minna and Chimen but, in total, 13 members of his extended family, including aunts, uncles and cousins, were actively involved in the CPGB, or in the respective national equivalent in the country in which they lived.

\(^{27}\) Samuel, *The Lost World*, 63.
\(^{28}\) A Narodnik was a term used to describe a member of the nineteenth-century Russian populist movement. Abramsky, ‘Raphael Samuel’.
If not actual members, many were supportive of radical political positions. As a result, continuous political activity was normal, infused within his day-to-day life and domestic spaces. Political meetings were conducted in the living room, fellow comrades looked after him after school, political leaflets adorned the kitchen table, and his mother knitted white ribbed socks intended for use by the Red Army. It shaped his child’s play through learning the names of Russian towns, marking out the military positions of the Red Army on a map and singing Russian songs, and it had all the qualities of an intriguing imaginary world with its own secret language, a pantheon of heroic figures and legends and even its own promised land (the Soviet Union). In all these ways, Samuel became attuned to politics as part of normal everyday life.

This youthful communism also furnished him with an early ethical framework for judging his behaviour and the behaviour of others. This hinged around an absolute antithesis to anything resembling individualism (the defining trait of bourgeois culture), the centrality of collectivism and the paramount importance of sustained political education and activity. As an only child, surrounded by such an intense adult world, with no immediate siblings close to his own age to refer to, such a blueprint for social behaviour offered reassurance. Communism, then, provided a ‘complete social identity’, even more important in the dark and confusing times of the war on the home front. Like many other city children, he was evacuated to the countryside (Buckinghamshire) and sent to a boarding school (Long Dene). Here, separated from his family and social network for the first time, his burgeoning sense of communist identity carried comforting connotations of the home he had left behind.

As he grew older, advancing towards more complex forms of abstract thinking, Marxism provided him with a conceptual framework and explanation of the world. In his own words:

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30 Samuel, *The Lost World*, 63. Some members of Samuel's family lived in France, others in America.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid., 59–62.
33 Ibid., 61, 66.
34 Ibid.
35 The second of Samuel's essays, 'Staying Power', focuses on the ways in which this ethical framework was constructed, transmitted and reproduced amongst the wider membership, *The Lost World*, 77–156.
Marxism, or what we called Marxism, reinforced this cosmic sense. It dealt in absolutes and totalities, ultimates and finalities, universals and organic wholes ... As a political economy, it showed us that capitalism was a unified essence ... As a science of society, if offered itself as an all-embracing determinism, in which accidents were revealed as necessities, and causes inexorably followed by effects. As a mode of reasoning, it provided us with a priori understandings and universal rules – laws of thought which were both a guide to action and a source of prophetical authority.37

But the important point here is that initially his communism had been non-theoretical. It had been primarily social and behavioural.38

Whilst communism was the dominant force in the development of his consciousness, the key means by which he encountered the world and protected himself from things he found threatening or uncomfortable, it was not an unadulterated force. It was inextricably entwined with the English political and social culture in which he lived. The notion of a Popular Front in the late 1930s and war years was given greater plausibility by its correspondence to coexisting notions and principles of unity active within the British culture of the times.39 This principle had, for example, long roots in the traditionally conceived British class system, finding its most demonstrable expression in the idea of working-class solidarity, the animating principle behind the organised labour movement as a political force. In socialist thought, the capacity to act together was deemed the most critical weapon in the struggle against capitalist oppression.

In a distinctive variation of the unity principle, the appeal to collectiveness was given a revised definition and renewed urgency during the war years. Rather than class unity, it was national unity that infused the political rhetoric, propaganda and media representation of wartime Britain. The country was hastily recast from a nation riven by class divisions and discontent into one united in a people’s war, a collective stand in the face of a common enemy.40 The invocation of a nation pulling together in extreme circumstances both reinforced and justified the unprecedented

37 Ibid., 49.
39 Ibid., 9.
levels of state economic and social control that came to define not only the war but also the postwar period. As historian Peter Hennessey put it: ‘[N]ever before and never since has a British Government taken so great and so intrusive a range of powers over the lives of its citizens’.

So intense was this appeal that it even prompted some, from both ends of the political spectrum, to speculate that, as a result of the war, Britain had drifted towards becoming a ‘classless’ society. Others would not go so far, but believed that the experiences fostered by the war and the ideas that informed plans for postwar reconstruction would contribute in bringing such a society about.

Such was the extent of interplay between communism and British culture that even the austere figure of Stalin was subtly adapted to the English climate:

The English Stalin … was an altogether more down-to-earth figure, corresponding in some way to our idealized conceptions of ourselves. He was a man of few words and simple tastes, personally modest, and of an essentially practical intelligence. We admired him, as a kind of Russian Churchill, for his combination of indomitable courage and earth commonsense.

Whilst the adaptation of Stalin was not necessarily done consciously, Samuel’s personal experience of anglicisation was deliberate. Following his return to London after the war, he joined the St Pancras branch of the Young Communist League where his fellow junior comrades struggled to pronounce Raphael. Determined to be a good communist and to subjugate his individuality for the sake of the group, he changed his name to Ralph.

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42 For example, Winston Churchill told the boys of Harrow school in December 1940: ‘There is no change which is more marked in our country than the continual and rapid effacement of class difference’. Quoted in Paul Addison, *Churchill on the Home Front: 1900–1955* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992), 327. It should be noted, however, that this was never the view taken by the CPGB.
44 Ibid., 87. ‘Ralph’ appears to have been intimately bound to an explicitly political persona. Following the breakdown of the first New Left (1956–62) and his appointment at Ruskin College (1962), he no longer referred to himself in this way in personal or professional correspondence, reverting back to ‘Raphael’. Furthermore, whilst all of his political writing was published under ‘Ralph’, this was not the case for any of his history work.
These were some of the most striking ways in which the communism of Samuel’s youth merged with existing English culture and traditions. There were other factors that also intimately informed his intellectual development. A direct form of exposure to existing English radical traditions came through his experiences of an English progressive education. He attended two progressive schools: Long Dene, a boarding school in the Buckinghamshire countryside, and later King Alfred School (KAS), in Hampstead North London, as a day pupil.

In Britain, forms of progressive education were often attached to left-libertarian politics drawing equally upon both scientific and moral rationales for their critique of conventional forms of education. Common features of this radical-libertarian educational philosophy included an emphatic sense of the child as an individual and active participant in the learning process. Progressive schools were also more expansive in their approach to subject matter, not necessarily privileging academic subject matter in their teaching. This was the case at both of his schools. Long Dene strongly emphasised rural and agricultural traditions. Similarly, KAS taught an eclectic curriculum including a significant amount of arts and crafts.45

In one sense, he used his political identity to differentiate himself from the politics of the schools he attended. As a communist, he saw himself as being on the side of collectivism, science, progress and modernisation, and was, therefore, disapproving of the indulgently liberal concern for individualism and the backward-looking enthusiasm for traditional crafts that were taught at his various progressive schools. Nevertheless, the unusual ethos and nature of this form of education was significant. For a bright and precocious youth, the greater respect and tolerance given to the student was quite unlike what he might have encountered in a more conventional institution. Ironically, as a self-professed communist during a time of general suspicion towards communism, he would have been amongst the most strikingly individualistic of all the students at the school.46

46 To be a communist was considered a ‘cachet’. Ron Jones quoted in Smithson, Community Adventure: The Story of Long Dene School, 21.
In progressive schools like the ones he attended, it was not uncommon for the teaching staff to be intellectually and personally sympathetic to the more radical forms of politics. Violet Hyett, his tutor in junior classes at KAS, emphasised historical method and global perspectives over narrowly British political and constitutional history. She was even known to teach some principles of Marxist economics in her classes.\textsuperscript{47} Another influential history tutor was John Handford, a fellow communist (given the Cold War politics of the period, he allegedly denied this when applying for the job) who was instrumental in introducing him to the eminent Marxist historians of the day and in encouraging him to apply for Oxford University.\textsuperscript{48}

It was not, however, only English society and traditions that shaped his youthful communism. There was also the important nuance provided by his family’s Jewish origins. This relationship was complex. In his mother’s case, Judaism was one of the factors that she viewed as an encumbrance on her activities. The rejection of her Jewish upbringing and her desire to escape from it had fuelled her attraction to communism.\textsuperscript{49} Accordingly, she guided the young Samuel in his first political act, telling God that he did not exist.\textsuperscript{50} His relationship with Judaism was not fraught in the same way as his mother’s (although he bitterly resented being forced to have a Jewish education, which was part of the terms of the divorce between his parents, and defiantly smuggled Thomas Paine into his Hebrew lessons). Several members of his family, including his uncle and grandmother, retained their faith, speaking Yiddish and Hebrew, recognising Jewish traditions and marking Jewish holidays.\textsuperscript{51} For all that he rejected the explicit religious connotations of Judaism as a faith, it was still present in his life as a cultural identity.

One conscious effect of the influence that his Jewish identity had on him was an early assumption that Jewish people were more likely to be progressively minded and attracted to socialism.\textsuperscript{52} Another was the access and exposure to intellectual, linguistic and literary traditions of cultures that

\textsuperscript{48} Brian Harrison, ‘Interview with Raphael Samuel’, 18 September 1987, 19 Elder Street, London, transcripts held in Raphael Samuel Archive (RSA), Bishopsgate Institute, London.
\textsuperscript{49} Samuel, \textit{The Lost World}, 67.
\textsuperscript{50} Samuel, ‘Jews and Socialism: The End of a Beautiful Friendship?’, 8.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.; Samuel, \textit{The Lost World}, 63.
\textsuperscript{52} Samuel, ‘Jews and Socialism: The End of a Beautiful Friendship?’, 8.
lay outside of Englishness. Arguably, he picked up on the Jewish tradition of ‘sociable argument’ with alacrity.53 On a more subconscious level, a Jewish cultural identity might have played some part in reinforcing the sense of living amongst a wider society whilst simultaneously being apart from it, able to view it from a distanced, de-familiarised perspective. Moreover, learning Jewish history, with its recurrent themes of persecution and exile embedded deeply within Jewish customs and stories, further underlined the paramount importance of justice and the value of democracy.

Samuel’s early communism must be understood as informed by multiple contending factors, referencing both the wider historical context of the times but also the more personal histories implicit within his background. This, in effect, was one of the key arguments in his reflections, sketched out in the Lost World essays. Less explicitly stated but nevertheless a discernible current throughout those essays was an underpinning ethos of collectivism that drew the eclectic components together. The core value underpinning the particularities of his Anglo-Jewish, child’s-eye-view communism was the paramount importance of popular participatory democracy, achieved by forging alliances and mobilising social movements from below. It was this that, from his youthful perspective, lay at heart of the Marxist science of society. It was what the entire Communist Party was geared towards, the rationale behind the demands it placed on its membership and what it sought to achieve in its practices. It was what the Soviet Union and Stalin were supposed to embody. This sense of justice was what underpinned both his conviction and his ardent commitment to communism.54

As a teenager, growing up in the more conflicted years of the Cold War, he came to identify a more specific political role for himself, desiring to become a CPGB organiser.55 In this ambition he followed his mother (the key organiser for the Slough branch of the party), indicating once again the significance of her influence upon him. In terms of the overall CPGB organisational structure, the ‘organiser’ was drawn from amongst the rank-and-file membership. They were distinguished from their comrades by their self-taught intellectual prowess, forming a sort of ‘proletarian clerisy’. The role of the organiser forged a bridge between the wider body of party members and the party’s hierarchy.56 Samuel’s aspiration to this role

54 Samuel recalls an early school report noting that at the age of six he already had an obsession with ‘justice and fairness’. Samuel, The Lost World, 59.
56 Ibid., 201.
provides an intriguing insight into his youthful character. As a precocious and intelligent child from a family who had become well established within the party structure (Abramsky also held key party positions serving as the secretary of the party’s Jewish committee, the editor of *The Jewish Clarion* and chairman of the party’s Middle East committee), he might well have aspired to a more high-profile position. And yet he remained attracted to this particular role that placed him in much closer relation to the rank-and-file membership.

In the *Lost World*, he supplied some descriptions of the nature and the implications of these sorts of more practical activist-leadership roles in the party drawing on both his personal experiences and official party documentation to do so. They make revealing reading (italics are my own):

> 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 new comers to ‘express’ themselves …

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 …

And again:

> Recruiting – the only Party activity I was any good at – involved, I now realize, a tutor-pupil relationship, not least in its elaborate pretence of equality between the teacher and the taught; it was a learning process which demonstrated the power of knowledge.

The role, as he described it, has some notable features. Firstly, it was an acutely social role dealing directly with people. Secondly, it required the individuals in question to have a clear consciousness of their own performance in relation to the people they were dealing with, coming

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57 Rapaport-Albert, ‘Chimen Abramsky Obituary’.
60 Ibid., 195.
across as a co-worker, being welcoming and inclusive, and so on. Thirdly, much depended upon the individual’s ability to synthesise different areas of expertise into a collective endeavour and identify areas of common ground between their interests and the person(s) they were engaging with. Finally, it called upon skills in using that common ground as the basis to infuse the subject with ‘party mindedness’, to provoke an internal transformation, all the more plausible and effective because the subject was complicit in the process. To summarise, this role utilised forms of intelligence and skill both pragmatic and profoundly psychological in character.

As the anecdote provided at the beginning of the chapter suggests, Samuel showed an early prowess and zeal for organisation. Later he would continue his efforts to convert his school mates over to communism, even setting up his own branch of the Young Communists League at KAS. What is important to note is that as extraordinary as his upbringing was – heavily political, set against the backdrop of the looming threat of fascism, the experiences of war on the British home front and, as shall be discussed in the next section, the Cold War in the years that followed – his childhood was fundamentally a happy one, with plenty of mental stimulus and a tight knit, supportive social network, much of which was provided by the party. This was never a time that he would come to think badly of.

The Communist Party Historians’ Group

The Communist Party Historians’ Group (CPHG) (1946–56) provided a first-hand example of the ways in which connections could be forged between the popular, the political and the intellectual. Initially formed to discuss a second edition of A.L. Morton’s *A People’s History of England* (1938), part of the effort to ‘reclaim the national past’ and consequently a popular Left Book Club choice, the group’s project consequently evolved through regular meetings held at either the Garibaldi restaurant or Marx House in London over the course of a decade. Membership was a mix of academic and non-academic historians, older and younger generations of communists. Samuel was the youngest member of the group, joining at the age of 16 in 1951. He was introduced to it by John Handford,

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and eagerly seized the opportunity to see at close quarters figures that he had glimpsed at his uncle’s gatherings or read about in communist literature – well-established warriors in the communist battle of ideas.

The CPHG is credited with making a substantial contribution to British historiography, both in propelling social history to prominence and for containing the seeds of ‘history from below’ through the work of members such as Christopher Hill, Eric Hobsbawm and E.P. Thompson (although he was not as closely affiliated with the group as is commonly assumed).63 Other commentators, however, whilst acknowledging the group’s significance, have drawn greater attention to the tensions and complexities that both surrounded and underpinned the group’s endeavours.64

Whilst the CPHG’s work was a very deliberate continuation of the Popular Front people’s history, part of a wider battle of ideas (or, more accurately, battle of beliefs), at the same time it was first formed within a very different political atmosphere to that of the late 1930s when the party enjoyed a growth in its popularity. The late 1940s, by contrast, was dominated by the early years of the Cold War in which suspicion and hostility towards the CPGB and its membership intensified considerably.65 Even former socialists, such as the writer George Orwell, were already advancing strong critiques of state socialism, advocating instead the merits and virtues of a distinctively domesticated socialism characterised by civil liberties.66

The tensions between the internationalism of its aspirations as a political movement and the contending claims and realities presented by its national manifestations also remained unresolved. The 1948 Yugoslav Crisis provided a vivid illustration of this. In Moscow, the break between General Tito, the Yugoslavian leader, and Stalin was depicted as a betrayal of the communist movement. In Yugoslavia, and sections of the western

66 See, for example, George Orwell, The Lion and the Unicorn (1941), Animal Farm (1945), 1984 (1948).
In 1951, the CPGB formally announced its intention of pursuing The British Road to Socialism. This was a ground-breaking move in which the party appeared to break from its unquestioning loyalty to Soviet-style communism. As party leader Harry Pollitt phrased it, “The progress of democratic and Socialist forces throughout the world has opened out the new possibilities of transition to Socialism by other paths than those followed by the Russian Revolution.” Despite what seemed to suggest a radical departure, this remained a profoundly sensitive and divisive issue amongst the CPGB membership.

There was also a continuing unease with the role of intellectuals amongst the party’s membership. The firm assertion of a party line was, inevitably, restrictive for those whose vocations across all the various disciplines, perhaps particularly in the humanities and creative arts, demanded the freedom to experiment, dissent and pursue their inquiries freely. The pressure to conform led a number of brilliant party intellectuals, such as scientists J.D. Bernal, J.B.S. Haldane and the writer Arnold Kettle, to become increasingly isolated, the importance of their work marginalised due to their slavish accord with Moscow. Others, finding the situation untenable (including literary scholar Raymond Williams and writer Doris Lessing), retreated or withdrew altogether from the party during this time. Hobsbawm, in a highly selective memoir of the group, argued that the historians enjoyed a better relationship with the party than others, but he was forced to acknowledge that the CPGB took a far more interventionist stance when it came to writing the history of the British labour movement or the party itself. Given this context, as Bill Schwarz has suggested, the group’s project might best be described as providing a more substantial theorisation of the Popular Front political project.

67 The 14-year-old Samuel had conformed with the Moscow line on this issue, instructing wavering relatives in the correct interpretation. Samuel, *The Lost World*, 87.
71 Schwarz, “‘The People’ in History.”
Samuel was already familiar with many of the group’s membership, having followed their work in the party’s press outlets. Many were well-known figures across the movement. Christopher Hill’s essay on the English revolution, for example, had inspired a young E.P. Thompson to study history at university. Born in 1912 into a committed Methodist family in York, Hill had gone on to read modern history under Vivian Galbraith (1889–1976) at Balliol College, Oxford. He had conceived an early interest in seventeenth-century literature, later recalling how Galbraith had encouraged him to explore the ways in which it illuminated the period. Having graduated from Oxford in 1934, he joined the CPGB, which, in addition to a 10-month research trip to the Soviet Union, brought his literary and historical interests into dialogue with Marxist political-economy. The first major fruits of this had been *The English Revolution, 1640* (1940), a heavy-handed attempt to recast the English civil war as bourgeois revolution. He later described the book as that of a young man full of anger in the midst of the Second World War.

Hill’s essay ‘The Norman Yoke’, which, as Schwarz argued, came to be emblematic of the group’s activities, saw him break from his usual terrain of seventeenth-century high politics and turn his attention towards popular ideology. He opened with a sketch of the *story* of the ‘Norman Yoke’ as it was commonly known: before the Norman invasion of 1066, the Anglo-Saxon inhabitants of Britain had lived as free and equal citizens, governing themselves through representative institutions. The Norman Conquest had destroyed this, replacing it with a hierarchical feudal system of political organisation. The struggle to regain those lost rights had been continuous, occasionally punctuated by concessions, such as the signing of the Magna Carta treaty, this notwithstanding, that harmonious world remained lost.

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Moving first to his home territory, the English seventeenth century, Hill retraced the story’s fractured lines of historiographic (re)interpretation. For jurist Edward Coke (espousing the ‘bourgeois’ position), the treaty signified an important restoration of lost rights and provided the historical basis for the rule of law. The Levellers, however, (advancing a ‘bourgeois-democratic’ position) argued that the Magna Carta had not gone far enough in redressing the damages wrought by the Normans. The Diggers (advocating the most radical and revolutionary position) fixed their view firmly on the restoration of that lost world and demanded a complete abolition of property rights.

The historiographer’s tale continued. Hill then considered the account as it had been contested by arch-Whig Edmund Burke (the Magna Carta as an opening chapter in the evolutionary development of British civil liberties as embodied, enacted and protected within its legal and political institutions) and the radical Thomas Paine (that the Magna Carta had been little more than a means of abating the worst excesses of tyranny) in the late eighteenth century. In the imaginative hands of nineteenth-century artist, poet and socialist thinker William Morris, his views already tempered by exposure to the work of Marx, it was not, as for the Diggers, a literal restoration of Anglo-Saxon England (already tainted by the seeds of feudal organisation) that captivated him, but the importance of the ideal represented by reference to a pre-feudal society: the organic, egalitarian, self-determining community.

The ‘Norman Yoke’ was not just history as political propaganda between contending groups. It had been the prompt for substantial historical research, later benefiting from the insights afforded by developments in scientific anthropology. Only in Marxism, argued Hill reaching the crux of his ‘reconciliatory operation’, was the story’s real significance fully subsumed and clarified as being, at core, about ‘the recognition of class struggle as the basis of politics, the deep sense of Englishness of the common people’.

This Englishness, he warned in his closing lines, was not peripheral but essential. Whilst Marxism offered the best, most scientific explanation of the story, which the Marxist intellectual was compelled to extrapolate and explain, what had given it imaginative vitality and emotional resonance down the ages was just such an appeal to nation and ‘true’ patriotism as love of that nation.

78 Ibid., 66.
79 Ibid.
The work of Hill and others with the group offered a bold and compelling attempt at uniting national history with Marxist theory. Despite this, there were some obvious problems and contradictions that arose from this project. The attempt to discern an immanent socialism from within the English past could feel contrived. At times it could fail to fully account for important historical facts. Moreover, it raised critical questions about the nature of human agency and its relationship to social and economic structures. Equally, the relationship between history as a discipline and critical theory remained largely unresolved. These issues prefigured many of the debates that would come to dominate radical historiography in later years.

Nevertheless, such a dramatic interpretive intervention in the making of the English past and the innovative engagement with popular ideologies had a lasting impact on the landscape of British historiography, not least because it also provided the crucible for the journal Past and Present: A Journal of Scientific History (P&P; 1952–) founded by several members of the group in conjunction with non-Marxist academic historians. Whilst a means of continuing and communicating the groups’ work, the journal was never a CPGB mouthpiece or propagandist tool. It set out with a far more ambitious agenda – to champion and advance a whole new way of thinking about and practising history. In an academic teaching and research culture still largely preoccupied with the high politics and legislative fine print, P&P historians like Hill, Hobsbawm and medievalist Rodney Hilton posed a dramatic revision to notions of causation in change over time. Rather than take the acts and actions of individuals, politicians, military leaders or legislators as the critical site of action, the contributors of P&P transferred their attention to charting the development of socioeconomic forces and tracing their effects on political decision-making and social organisation.

To return to this experience from Samuel’s perspective, it must be remembered that on joining the group he was still a schoolboy, not a trained historian. His interest in history was, at this time, entirely ideological, supplemented by the guidance of his uncle and later politically.

80 See, for example, the critique of Hill advanced by fellow group member Victor Kiernan. MacLachlan, The Rise and Fall of Revolutionary England, 117–18; Dworkin, Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain, 35–37.
81 Richard Johnson, ‘Edward Thompson, Eugene Genovese and Socialist-Humanist History’, HWJ, 6 (1978), 79–100; Schwarz, “The People” in History, 70–71; Dworkin, Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain, 44.
sympathetic teachers like Hyett and Handford. The ‘monuments’ of his historical reading had included Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905) and R.H. Tawney’s *Religion and Rise of Capitalism* (1926), both of which had made a critical examination into the relationship between religious belief and the development of capitalism. Another youthful favourite was the French historian George Lefebvre’s *The Coming of the French Revolution* (1939), the first to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the revolution. Lefebvre, the first to coin the term ‘history from below’, had approached his study of the revolution and the experience of class struggle from the eyes of the French peasantry.

In joining the CPHG, his excitement was piqued by the prospect of political battle rather than the musk of ancient documents. He was, at this time, far less invested, intellectually or emotionally, in the literal substance of the more specific historical debates that took place amongst the group (which is not to say that he was entirely ignorant of or oblivious to them). Furthermore, for a committed activist, it was natural that he would be just as inspired by the group’s other main *raison d’etre*, its educational activities. This manifested not only in the dissemination of its work but in the organisation of large conferences and the facilitating of publications, such as *Our History* or the *Local History Bulletin* to encourage a wide cross-section of popular participation in history-making.

One of the most critical figures in orchestrating these initiatives was Dona Torr, a CPGB member since its inception in 1920. She had taken on a range of responsibilities as a party worker including editorial work and translation. In Torr there was a model for the exemplary party worker, indefatigable and entirely committed to encouraging others in their work for the sake of the wider cause. Her importance for members such as John Saville and Christopher Hill was expressed in the introduction to *Democracy and Labour Movement* (1954):

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Always [Torr] claims to be learning from the humblest student, to see new lines of thought opening from the tritest remark: though it is she who discovers them. She has taught us historical passion. For her the understanding of the historical process is an intense emotional experience … History was the sweat, blood, tears and triumphs of the common people, our people.86

Torr’s passion for history had led her to chair the party committee advising on scripts for ‘People’s History’ projects organised in the late 1930s. These had included ‘March of History’ summer pageants featuring figures like Oliver Cromwell and commemorating democratic milestones like the thirteenth-century founding of parliament by Simon de Monfort.87 In the CPHG she was a dedicated mentor to the younger, emerging scholars and the general editor for the documentary book series History in the Making, supposedly comprised of ‘the very words and thoughts’ of ordinary people as they made their own history.88 Whilst Torr was, in many ways, the embodiment of a good communist intellectual, in other respects, as for many party workers, the democracy of her practices often clashed with the dogmatism entailed by her deep political commitment. Her loyalty to the party and the party line was unquestioning and, in her desire to uphold it at all times, she could be as severe and authoritarian as she was generous and supportive.89

The schoolboy Samuel drew important lessons from the group. Firstly, that history showed (or could be written to show) the critical role played by the popular movement in social and political change. Secondly, that the act of history-making was in itself deeply political and that historians should be as conscious and aware of the present as they were of the past.

86 John Saville, ‘Introduction’, in Saville, ed., Democracy and the Labour Movement: Essays in Honour of Dona Torr (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1954), 8. See also an acknowledgment of Torr’s intellectual support and assistance in E.P. Thompson, ‘Introduction’, in William Morris, Romantic to Revolutionary (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1955). This description of Torr bears some striking parallels with those that would later be written about Samuel as a historian-educator, reinforcing the extent to which communism was as much a mode of behavioural practice and ethical conduct amongst its adherents as it was an identification with a specific Marxist political-economic theory.


88 Dona Torr, ed., History in the Making (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1948). These words and thoughts were often remarkably ‘Marxist’ in their nature, suggesting the work of skilful editing. MacLachlan, The Rise and Fall of Revolutionary England, 83. The extent of admiration for Torr is evident by the effusive acknowledgement of her work in Saville, Democracy and the Labour Movement. See also Thompson, ‘Foreword’, in William Morris, Romantic to Revolutionary (1955 ed.).

89 MacLachlan, The Rise and Fall of Revolutionary England, 83.
Thirdly, that history-making ought to be a popular thing, not merely the preserve of scholars. Finally, there was the working atmosphere of the group itself. A figure like Torr set another strong example of a communist historian-educator in the comradeship and collaboration demonstrated in many (although not all) of her practices. In this sense, the group served, on several levels, as a prime example of what political scholarship and history-making ‘should’ be about.

Oxford student politics

Raphael Samuel, Balliol College, 1956

In 1952, aged 17, Samuel went up to Oxford to read modern history. Whilst he had long been practising the skills of the aspiring organiser, it was during his student days that he really honed them. Encouraged by Handford to apply for an exhibition at Balliol College, he did so purely for the chance to work closely with Hill (then a senior tutor at Balliol), later claiming to have been unmoved by the university’s prestige and ‘extremely disappointed by the coldness … of the history course’.90 He could not, however, have been insensitive to the practical opportunities it afforded him.

As a communist, he was under pressure to be a ‘good student’ lest he discredit the party’s reputation for engendering a culture of moral seriousness and intellectual studiousness. Although Hill was the primary draw for him, the relationship with him during this time seems to have been cooler than might have been expected. There were several reasons for this. The Cold War meant that whilst Hill was politically active, he was under pressure to keep his political convictions and academic responsibilities distinct from one another. He was also a reserved personality notoriously favouring a tutorial approach of ‘question and answer’, posing a question to his students and waiting with unrelenting patience for the answer. If unprepared, the student would be left to flounder terribly whilst Hill watched on in unremitting silence.

He was, of course, exposed to different tutors and, consequently, to forms of history and political perspectives that were sceptical if not overtly critical of Marxism. This did not prevent him from forming good relationships with them, in particular A.B. Rodger, whom he described as a ‘Tory Radical’ in his politics. He found Rodgers’ animated and discursive approach to tutorials more stimulating than the austere silence of Hill.

In his undergraduate studies, he was, naturally, an enthusiastic early member of the Past and Present society, developing a strong passion for economic history. He attended the lectures of economic historian John Habakkuk, which he thought of as being the most subversive form of history available given its focus on large social forces and processes, rather than the internal wrangling of political leaders. His work from the time reflects this, including lecture notes on ‘The Trade Cycle: 1780–1850’ or ‘Iron and Steel in the Industrial Revolution’ and essays written on ‘The Significance of the Banking and Company Legislation on the Peel Administration’. Collectively, this work focused on industrialisation in nineteenth-century Britain, a compelling subject for a young Marxist. Despite this, the Oxford undergraduate modern history syllabus that he followed from 1952 to 1956 remained firmly wedded to traditional forms

91 Ibid. See also a speech made by Communist MP Willie Thompson to Cambridge students in 1934 expressing the party’s need for intellectuals as quoted in Jonathan Clark and Margot Heinemann, eds, *Culture and Crisis in Britain in the Thirties* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1979), 32.
92 Brian Harrison, ‘Interview with Raphael Samuel’, 18 September 1987. This was a style of teaching that Hill was renowned for. Briggs, ‘Hill (John Edward) Christopher (1912–2003)’.
95 Ralph Samuel, ‘Undergraduate Notes and Essays’, Samuel 080/ University Notes, Raphael Samuel Archive (RSA), Bishopsgate, London.
of constitutional and political history, which it was not only necessary but imperative to study in order to pass the final examinations (there was no opportunity for independent research work) and gain a degree.⁹⁶

Samuel’s student years were conducted after the CPGB’s adoption of The British Road to Socialism (1951) and were, therefore, dominated by a sustained and continuous effort to forge alliances with a broad spectrum of left-wing political positions. Some picture of the intense and eager student can be discerned from accounts written of him by his contemporaries from this time. In a reflective memoir-come-tribute to his long-term friend and Oxford contemporary, Stuart Hall remarked that he was both ‘the pariah and the heart and soul of the Oxford political scene’ and that ‘nothing of significance happened in Oxford without Raphael being in some way involved in it’.⁹⁷ Jean McCrindle, a Scottish-born fellow communist, Oxford student and his partner during this time, described him as a dedicated and tireless recruiting officer for the party, whose utter political commitment and seriousness could verge on the ‘tyrannical’.⁹⁸

His political output during this time was tremendous. He was actively involved in the university’s Communist group throughout his student years, becoming its secretary in the second year of his degree. He engaged with a range of other left-wing groups and initiatives including the Socialist Club. He was the key moving force behind numerous political petitions and campaigns, always remaining alert to potential recruitment opportunities for the party. Towards the end of his Oxford years, he set his sights increasingly towards working with the Oxford Labour Club. In the midst of all this overwhelming activity, it is remarkable that he managed to fit in any academic work whatsoever!

Student and college life, as he experienced it in the Balliol College of the mid-1950s, encouraged this intensive round of clubs, groups and discussion parties. In his eyes, Balliol was inherently subversive of the prevailing English ‘ancient regime’ under which the university as a whole was still in thrall. This perception was not purely a form of tribal loyalty to his college. Balliol boasted an impressive alumnus of prominent socialist

thinkers such as Tawney, and social reformers such as Tawney’s brother-in-law, William Beveridge, author of the Beveridge report upon which much of the postwar social welfare reforms were based. Then, of course, there was Hill who, despite his communism, had retained a prominent position at a time when others, such as Hobsbawm, were often overlooked or passed over.99

The college took in high numbers of international students and those who might be called ‘internal emigres’, people of Scottish, Welsh, Irish or, like Samuel and his fellow communist and New Left co-founder, Gabriel Pearson, Jewish social and cultural backgrounds. In short, it collected people who had complex relationships to ‘English’ society, which suited him.100 These were people often predisposed towards dissenting or radical political positions. All these factors had helped to give a sense that Balliol represented, if not exactly meritocracy, then certainly scholarly prowess over hereditary birth and privilege, placing it in ‘opposition’ to the university at large.101

This subversiveness needs contextualisation. In the Oxford of the 1950s, student life was still relatively regulated. Student life had not quite the degree of freedom then that would later be associated with it. Students were subject to curfews, the gates to the Balliol were locked at midnight, forcing anyone inclined towards more nocturnal activities to either scale the walls or confine their social activities to within the grounds. Colleges were still mostly single-sex environments, often fuelling the development of intense friendships amongst members. Moreover, the university bore the heavy impress and consciousness of tradition and prestige. In the eyes of some, at Oxford on scholarships achieved through hard work, a significant proportion of the main student body still retained the aura of self-confidence typical of a life of privilege and elitism.102

Samuel’s activities were not confined to Balliol College, but involved sustained attempts at engaging with left-wing groups across the university. Navigating the intricate and pseudo-tribal world of the left in Oxford required that he be highly conscious of the sociological, psychological and

102 Ibid., 182.
emotional structures of political allegiance. Oxford’s Labour politics was made up of a significant proportion of middle-class Fabian reformists, with a fair smattering of political careerists in their midst. It also contained a significant proportion of working-class scholarship or mature-aged students for whom supporting Labour was an act of loyalty and solidarity, but who would often find themselves uncomfortable amongst the other strands. Then there were ‘independent’ socialists unaffiliated, many coming from a position outside of mainstream English society and commonly from liberal middle-class family backgrounds. Finally, of course, there were a very small number of communists, a striking number of which had come through public schools and were, definitively, not working class in their social origins.

Samuel, committed to a minority political party viewed by many with hostility and suspicion, had to work extremely hard in order to gain a voice in Oxford student political debate. Reinforcing this was the fact that he was now encountering a greater number of people who were adept at ‘playing politics’. One strategy he adopted for dealing with these issues was simply to cultivate a charming and agreeable public persona. He later described this situation:

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. So a lot of my work was on colonialism in Oxford. And that was sort of finding a common language with people who were anti-colonial for other reasons.

Whilst he typically attributed the imperative to be ‘palatable’ to his communist training, it was more unique to his own personality and preoccupations. On Samuel’s arrival at Balliol, the incumbent secretary of the Oxford student communist club (from whom he took over in 1954) felt no such compulsion to promote the party in the same way and would not be drawn into political argument in public, keeping his communism

105 One might view his earlier decision to anglicise his name to Ralph as part of this desire.
as a form of private faith and personal counsel. Samuel, by contrast, was ‘evangelical’, selling party literature around the colleges and pursuing all opportunities for public debate.

So intently did he attempt to seek out the common ground through discussion that he would take great pains to find the most acceptable phrasing for a petition. He was even willing to adopt the less esoteric language of liberalism, resplendent with references to that comforting cover-all concept of ‘tolerance’. In the course of this process, he could not help becoming ‘a bit liberal himself’, reinforcing the extent to which he immersed himself into other people’s political languages.

Another tactic he adopted was organising campaigns on issues that cut across party-political lines. One revealing instance of this was his efforts to forge an alliance with existentialist philosophers against the prevailing dominance of Oxford analytical philosophy. The motivation behind this was that whilst both the analytical and the Marxist approach to philosophy gave a privileged position to materialist explanation, analytical philosophy was characterised by the stress that it placed on the pursuit of ‘objectivity’ in knowledge and in its emphasis on words rather than things. Marxism rejected both the notion that language could be detached from the material conditions and the productive relationships in which it was embedded or that knowledge could ever be entirely ‘objective’ or value free. Samuel, as a communist, found common ground with those attracted to existentialist philosophy and its austere insistence on existence over essence. It was during this venture that he encountered Charles Taylor, a French-Canadian philosophy student (and future co-founder of the first New Left).

There were further examples of his attempts to find issues or campaigns that brought together a number of disparate strands of the left-wing student body. He worked intently on a campaign against the hydrogen bomb (in response to early H-bomb tests carried out in November 1953), his work here taking him outside of the official party policy of this time. He also dedicated a considerable amount of energy to issues relating to anti-colonialism, becoming active in the campaign against the British Government’s deposition of the Guyanese Government in 1954.

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107 Ibid.
109 Ibid.
During his various campaigning activities, he encountered other figures who would go on to play key roles in the first New Left, including Stuart Hall, a Jamaican Rhodes Scholar graduate student and Peter Sedgwick, a grammar school boy from a Christian family in Liverpool.111

Apart from these specific campaigns, a more structured example of his attempts to liaise across political lines can be seen in his involvement, at the behest of the party, with the Oxford Socialist Club. The club, a 1930s breakaway group that had formed out of what had been the Oxford Labour Club, had been dormant for some years. The CPGB, committed to The British Road to Socialism, viewed the club as an opportunity to create a broad front organisation, and so he, along with several of his friends, set about reviving it. In part it acted as space that allowed for those outside of the official party to interact with communist ideas and politics. Hall later described debate in the club as wide ranging, preempting many of the issues that would later come to preoccupy the first New Left.112 He also recalled Samuel’s remarkable ability to bring even the most expansive and apparently abstract of questions in socialist political philosophy back into some kind of direct connection with worker unrest at the local Cowley car plant, an early glimpse of his prowess for connective and highly imaginative thinking.113

Samuel became closely involved with the club’s journal The Oxford Left, initially taking charge of publicity (Trinity 1953), advancing to the editorial board (Hillary 1954) and eventually becoming the sole named editor (Michaelmas 1954).114 The journal gives some sense of his interests and political approach during this time. Pieces on ‘Socialism and the Middle Classes’ and ‘The Mind of British Imperialism’ demonstrate his concern about and sensitivity towards the internal dynamics of political mentalities and the ways in which these were reformulated over time.115

114 Both the Socialist Club and the club’s journal, The Oxford Left, anticipated many of the themes and issues that preoccupied the first New Left and dominated the contents of Universities and Left Review, addressing issues such as the role of intellectuals, colonial issues, questions of contemporary socialism and the politics of popular culture.
After 1954 he began to harbour some scepticism about the party’s strategic use of the club, feeling that it ‘stopped people being faced with the hard question of whether or not they would become Communists’. This discomfort could be construed as an example of his unease with the stance of the CPGB and his absorption of the Cold War Cominform concern to demarcate and clarify political positions. Equally, for a 20-year-old man, still making the journey from youth to adulthood, such sectarianism might also be connected to the psychological and emotional processes of late adolescence, and the desire for sharply defined lines between those who were ‘one of us’ and those who were ‘fellow travellers’, to be approached with caution.

From another perspective, this can be seen as evidence of his genuine belief in alliance between openly different factions amongst the left. Rather than claiming communism to be the superior political model, the inevitable inheritor of the various branches of political left-wing thought, as members of the CPHG had done, Samuel’s discomfort suggests willingness to acknowledge and debate difference openly rather than to integrate them artificially.

Although deeply immersed in student politics he was equally involved in communist activity in Oxford city. This was not consciously undertaken as a form of university condescension or patronage towards the city. In theory, working-class people constituted a more natural milieu for the party to be targeting. He had a particularly close relationship with the local party organiser, Ernie Keeling, whom he deeply admired. Keeling, an Oxfordshire man and long-serving communist activist, provided another exemplar of the self-taught party worker and a mentor who he later described as a fatherly figure towards younger comrades. This period also planted some of the early seeds of what would become a long-term relationship with Ruskin College. Ruskin’s ties with the trade unions and its student base of working-class adults constituted an attractive potential crucible for communism and the party would canvass Ruskin continuously.

116 Brian Harrison, ‘Interview with Raphael Samuel’, 18 September 1987. Whilst the CPGB had committed to The British Road to Socialism in 1951, it was only after the death of Stalin in 1953 that a greater sense of the party ‘opening up’ was experienced.

His growing interest in the Oxford Labour Club was in keeping with his doubts concerning the use of the Socialist Club in party strategy. It was also compatible with his desire to forge connections beyond the confines of student life and his efforts to expand the grounds for intellectual debate. Following the CPGB’s 1951 policy transition and after the death of Stalin in 1953, there was a slight thaw in the intensity of the Cold War hostility that mellowed, marginally, the general feeling towards communists. On becoming the branch secretary of the university’s communist group in 1954, Samuel became even more concerned to take the Labour Party seriously as a political force. This drew him into a closer relationship with the Labour Club which, again, brought him perilously close to being in direct violation of his instructions from the CPGB whose relationship with Labour remained uneasy.\textsuperscript{118}

The intellectual and emotional constitution of the Labour Club students was distinctive from those who identified with the harder line of communism. Communists, Samuel would later suggest, formed a sort of ‘literati’, typically harbouring interests in literature, poetry or philosophy and often knowing very little about the practicalities of political life.\textsuperscript{119} Despite articulating a formal (theoretical) appreciation for the natural sciences, the student communists that he engaged with were more likely to approach politics on the basis of larger metaphysical or moral terms. The Labour Club, by contrast, had a more pragmatic character in its understanding of politics. More importantly it had a greater appreciation for the mechanics and apparatus of political power.

This growing interest was further compounded by his close relationship with Denis Butt. Butt was a mature-aged student and former wool sorter who had come to Oxford University from Ruskin College. A long-standing Labour man he went on to become a ‘prize recruit’ for the CPGB and one of Samuel’s closest friends.\textsuperscript{120} In the process of attempting to recruit Butt, he immersed himself in the cultural, psychological and emotional values involved in Labour politics saying later that: ‘my effort, which lasted


\textsuperscript{119} A sample of Samuel’s immediate friendship group reflects this: Pearson and Hall were English literature students, Taylor a philosophy student. Sedgwick initially read classics, later changing to psychology.

\textsuperscript{120} Brian Harrison, ‘Interview with Raphael Samuel’, 18 September 1987.
about a year, to recruit him, as it were, on Labour ground. And I actually, without knowing it, made myself into a kind of labour person’, further illustration of the intensive personal investment and impact on his own mindset that recruitment entailed.121

Whilst this dedication, consciousness and continual political activity were serious pursuits in both subject matter and general character, they were also crucial sources of social life for Samuel and his friends. As secretary of the Oxford communists, he would also organise concerts alongside the more explicitly political meetings, convincing prominent communist folk singers such as Ewan MacColl and A.L. Lloyd to come and perform. The act of political debate itself had profoundly social qualities, conducted over drinks and meals in college common rooms or in student bedrooms late into the night. Nor was the act of debating entirely austere. It involved a fair amount of posturing, jostling, teasing and sparring, all of which had entertaining, even comedic elements about them. He later recalled that he had:

actually liked arguing with Tories, and we used to get quite a lot of fun – in a way, almost as court jesters. It was such an improbable thing for anybody to be a Communist – and they were very tolerant of us, and we were delighted to be tolerated.122

Protests attended by only a handful of people (promptly dispersed by the college rugby club) provided a sense of camaraderie and solidarity amongst the motley few who had turned out. In this sense, politics was the source of deep-rooted long-lasting friendships, amplified and intensified in their intimacy by the single sex college environments in which so much of this discussion and organising took place.123

Politics was even the basis for his early romantic relationships. At the age of 21, with great flair and romance, he proposed to his partner, fellow communist Jean McCrindle, at the summit of Arthur’s Seat in Edinburgh. In his eyes, McCrindle’s credentials lay in her skills at collecting ‘good’ people for the party. Given his own enthusiasm for political recruitment and organisation, it struck him that she would make an ‘ideal comrade’

123 Samuel later commented that these were ‘extremely intense male friendships’, sharing similarities with ‘heterosexual relationships and jealousies’. Brian Harrison, ‘Interview with Raphael Samuel’, 20 October 1987.
in his imagined life of political activity. Initially, McCrindle accepted his proposal, but the engagement would later become a casualty of the upheavals caused by the events of 1956.

Up until the age of 21, Samuel’s communism was an all-encompassing world. It was a happy one of close relationships, intellectual stimulus and activity, experienced first and foremost as an entire way of living and mode of behaving. As a child communism had provided an anchor point for Samuel’s sense of identity, his social relationships and intellectual development. As a young adult in the early 1950s the heart of his communist activism was based on seeking out opportunities for strategic alliances and potential conversions.

Whilst the CPGB’s explicit policy provided his conscious political framework, the behavioural implications fostered by communism were of equal importance. His attraction to the roles of the activist and organiser provided him with clear values about intellectual work and the need to form a bridge between political activity on the ground and larger political ideas. This required that he work closely and collaboratively with a range of people, seeking out common ground and languages. For this he had already begun to develop a sophisticated public persona, drawing on strong interpersonal and communicative skills designed to make palatable and appealing a politics widely regarded as suspicious and alien. Such a project had also been reflected in the endeavours of the CPHG, who also sought to connect the familiar coordinates of the national past to the critical framework of Marxist analysis in a manner that was both accessible and popular.

Samuel’s time at Oxford University gave him an opportunity to further rehearse these skills of argument, persuasion and performance in the intimate arena of student politics. His student years also challenged some of his thinking, forcing him into closer contact with people outside of communist or radical left-wing cultures. The necessity of confronting these challenges made some inroads into his self-conscious communist sectarianism but did not amount to a threat to it. At the time of his

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125 Ibid.
graduation from Oxford in 1956, with the first-class degree in modern history desired by the party, he fully expected to take a full-time position in the party.\textsuperscript{126}

The events that unfolded across the course of that year were to irrevocably disrupt this intense and intimate world. Immediately following his graduation, and still acting on party orders to be an exemplary student, he began a PhD at the London School of Economics which he soon abandoned as political activity began to dominate his life more dramatically than ever.\textsuperscript{127}