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The Socialist Historian?

Raphael Samuel (far right) with students, London History Workshop Group, 1980
Saturday evening, St Paul’s Church, Oxford, 1 December 1979

Even by the History Workshop’s (HW’s) usual hectic standards, it had been a long day. In the evening, an audience into the hundreds gathered in the cavernous old body of St Paul’s Church, Oxford, a former church turned arts centre.¹ This was not how it was supposed to have been. The HW collective had intended to use Ruskin’s more spacious site out in Headington, which came with proper seats and central heating.² A combination of miscommunication and the new principal’s desire to assert his leadership had forced them to take St Paul’s for their venue.³ Clustered together in the available spaces, people huddled, cold, uncomfortable and slightly anxious, awaiting the final plenary session of the day and anticipating drama.

The general mood of Workshop meetings was always expectant, but on this occasion it was infused with a very palpable sense of tension. The front ‘stage’, lit up by bright spotlights, seemed to reinforce the mood. The day’s events had been difficult. In addition to the usual problems involved in coordinating such a large-scale event, such as time keeping, lunch provision and faulty equipment, this conference, more than the previous 12, had been overtly marked with conflict. The sheer volume of attendees and the task of marshalling them about had lost some of the fun of earlier occasions. The conference papers, once exciting, adrenalin-fuelled accounts from the forgotten realms of people’s history, were increasingly dominated by critical theory.

Many of the speakers, eager to get to the discussion at the end, had rattled through their papers, assuming audience familiarity with their material. Many of the Ruskin students found themselves unable to follow the complicated concepts and theorists knowingly alluded to. They became bored and resentful. In the spirited discussions that followed, they grew even more alienated from the proceedings.

In their own contribution to the conference, a plenary session on history as a weapon of struggle, the students presented research on worker historians in the 1920s. It had been an uninspiring affair, with the students never enthused with the project. They had wanted to hold a Workshop on the state and repression (which had seemed appropriate with Margaret Thatcher and the new Conservative Government already making their presence felt) but had been talked into having it on socialist theory, and given a project they did not much care about.4

The session got underway.5 Taking the stage, ‘heavily disguised as the spirits of Theory, Culture and History’, was Richard Johnson of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) and two veterans of the first New Left: Stuart Hall (also from the CCCS) and the historian Edward Thompson, fresh from the publication of his polemic ‘The Poverty of Theory’.6 Hall, now a prominent figure in British sociology and cultural studies, was the first to speak. He was a good orator, and an old hand at sparring with Thompson. His paper was critical but reasonable, agreeing with his former comrade on the ‘poverty of theoreticism’ but also suggesting that few had taken French social theorist Louis Althusser’s theoretical claims that seriously.7 He entered a plea for the necessity and importance of cultural theory, adding that Thompsonian-style polemic was unhelpful in addressing the complexities of the issues at hand.8

Richard Johnson followed. Johnson had already provoked Thompson’s ire by suggesting that he represented the first ‘turn’ towards cultural analysis in Marxist political thought but had been unable to develop a more substantial theory of cultural materialism.9 Beside the other two men, he was not as accomplished a ‘performer’. The force of his argument was better expressed in his writing.10 His main point was that theory did express real social problems and was therefore important to engage with.11

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4 Ibid.
5 Raphael Samuel, ‘1st Dec. evening’, RS 5: History Workshop audio recordings/024, RSA.
11 Ibid.
Tentatively, he also suggested that Thompson himself had elements of the ‘absolutist’ in his intellectual posture, as much as any ‘theorist’ could be said to have.\textsuperscript{12}

But then came Thompson, a compelling physical presence with his ‘wild good looks’ and powerful speaking voice.\textsuperscript{13} On that evening there was a particularly hunted air about him, born out of frustration with the British left in all its forms.\textsuperscript{14} He was impatient with the ‘niceties’, the cosiness, of the HW’s general approach and weary with the theory debate. He had said what he wanted to say in \textit{The Poverty of Theory}, but still they demanded that he explain it again, when he wanted to move on to more serious political issues, such as the revival of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND).\textsuperscript{15}

With all this bubbling just below the surface Thompson turned on his opponents, upbraiding the ‘theorists’ for performing a ‘psycho drama within the enclosed ghetto of the theoretical left’.\textsuperscript{16} The overall effect of Thompson’s contribution and manner was an atmosphere that left further ‘discussion’ virtually impossible. Hall and Johnson were hurt and annoyed. There was outrage and upset amongst the audience, with one woman angrily rejecting the ‘booming male voices’ on the stage.\textsuperscript{17} All the tensions and divisions that had been just about held at bay during the course of the day were suddenly laid bare. Ugly and exposed.\textsuperscript{18} Even the evening’s proposed entertainment of folk song did little to lift the mood.\textsuperscript{19}

What of Raphael Samuel, the HW’s organiser? Many expected him to do something, to intervene in some way. But he seemed to do nothing.\textsuperscript{20} There was a scheduled plenary session, ‘Socialist history, past, present and future’, due to be held at 5pm the next afternoon.


\textsuperscript{15} Thompson, ‘The Politics of Theory’, 396.

\textsuperscript{16} Kettle, ‘The Experience of History’, 543.

\textsuperscript{17} Samuel, ‘1st Dec. evening’, audio recording, RS 5: History Workshop audio recordings/026, RSA.

\textsuperscript{18} Samuel received a considerable number of letters complaining about the session. ‘HW 13 correspondence’, RS 7: History Workshop Events/039, RSA.

\textsuperscript{19} Alun Howkins, oral communication to author, May 2012, Diss, Norfolk.

\textsuperscript{20} Stuart Hall, oral communication to author, May 2012, Hampstead, London.
Mysteriously, this was cancelled.21

Given the drama of the events, it is unsurprising that commentators have viewed HW 13 as symbolic of the ‘ectonic shift from social history to cultural history’;22 the collision between the cultural politics of a 1968 left and the social politics of the 1950s New Left.23 This, however, tends to reduce the full complexity of the debates into a ‘generation game’, a tedious power struggle amongst left-wing intellectuals, which, in turn, obscures the importance of the issues addressed.24 At stake were questions concerning the relationship between mind and body, the possibilities and limits of historical knowledge and the role of the historian in respect to this.

This chapter focuses on Samuel’s response to these debates, both in terms of his direct contribution and also his actions. It argues that this period marked a significant turning point in his personal intellectual development, political sensibilities and his perception of himself as a public intellectual and educator.

Agency and structure

The year 1979 had been a gruelling one for the political left not least because of the re-election of a Conservative Government, led by Margaret Thatcher, earlier in the year. This had not appeared in a vacuum; it was the result of an accumulation of simmering fractures and tensions. The escalation of union militancy, greeted with enthusiasm by some in the late 1960s, had increasingly turned in upon itself leading to bitter inter-union disputes and damaging conflicts between work groups, undermining any sense of class solidarity. Moreover, the so-called ‘winter of discontent’ (1978–79) – the series of strikes at hospitals, in refuse collection and in public transport – had most affected members of the public, in particular

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21 Carolyn Steedman, oral communication to author, May 2013, University of Warwick.
working-class people, not the workers’ employers.25 As Eric Hobsbawm commented in his 1978 Marx Memorial lecture ‘The Forward March of Labour Halted’, ‘We now see a growing division of workers into sections and groups, each pursuing its own economic interest irrespective of the rest’.26

Division was not confined to internal disputes amongst an industrial workforce but equally present amongst the emerging social movement groups. It was especially evident in the HW’s often tense relationship with the women’s movement.27 With its base at the trade union affiliated Ruskin College, the socialist politics of many of Ruskin’s students, and Workshop participants, were deeply rooted in the highly masculine world of the labour movement and union politics. The women’s movement challenged the ‘received wisdom’ implied by this form of socialism. The Workshops on ‘The Child in History’ and ‘Women in History’, which grew out of the Women’s Liberation Workshop (1970), had been both exciting but also difficult affairs where tensions had run high.

Confronted with the confusion and fragmentation of its most important concepts and vehicles, class solidarity and unionism, those amongst the intellectual left naturally turned their attention towards conceptual questions: what was ‘class’? To what extent had its meaning changed, why had it done so? How were the political insights implied by other cultural identities, such as gender, race, or sexuality, to be connected? These were important questions to ask in the rethinking, redefining, of socialism. History had an important role to play in addressing why particular ideas emerged, how they developed and, critically, what, if any, common ground lay between them. This had been the motivation for hosting the HW in the first place.

Of further significance was the breakdown of independent forms of workers’ education and the move towards a broadly conceived ‘adult education’, embedded within university extramural departments. Such a move naturally changed the conditions in which political debate could take place, inevitably introducing formalised structures into

the learning process. The general expansion of higher education and the fracturing of subjects into multiple subdisciplinary specialisms meant that much of the important work of self-examination was being conducted amongst increasingly enclosed, self-referential academic groups. Working so intensively within a competitive academic culture, still largely sceptical towards ‘radical’ political views, also meant that a considerable amount of energy was required just to be taken seriously as a professional thinker. So, whilst the political left had always ‘wrestled’ amongst itself, generation against generation, activist against intellectual, never before had divisions been so complex and so many.

The confrontation between Thompson, Hall and Johnson was set against these tensions and went straight to the core of them, addressing two distinct but related issues: what was the key crucible of social consciousness? What degree of agency did the individual have? From its earliest articulations, Marxism had always stressed the means of production as the critical determinant in sociopolitical organisation and change over time. In the century and more since Marx had first set out his evolutionary schema, its all-encompassing logic had shown some limitations. In step with an economy moving away from secondary industry, components of the left also shifted attention towards structures of meaning. This was not a simple move from body to mind, the tensions lay in the traffic between the two.

The relationship between structures of meaning and social structures was not the only contentious strand of the debates. A recurrent and unresolved issue for the intellectual left was the question of human agency. With the individual buffeted on all sides by determining forces, what, if any, scope was there for effective action? It was on this issue that Thompson had taken a firm stance in the 1950s and, subsequently, made the connecting thread throughout his later work.\(^{28}\) *The Making of the English Working Class* had, in part, constituted a more sustained working out of his ideas about the relationship between class consciousness and material conditions of being. It had, however, been anything but the last word on the subject.

During the 1960s, Thompson engaged in a protracted exchange on the subject with Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn, the new, young editors of the *New Left Review*. Viewing their predecessors as lacking in a systematic

cultural sociology, Anderson and Nairn had set about addressing this in a series of bold articles intent on rethinking the past and present of English socialism to take better account of perpetuating ideological frameworks.\(^{29}\) Thompson’s replies were dense and sceptical. Drawing upon the depth of historical knowledge set out in *The Making of the English Working Class*, he further pressed his case for the presence of a dynamic and democratic popular culture in the English past. It’s ‘failure’ to translate into a dominant power structure, he contended, had lain in the inability of the left to link together the different components within itself.\(^{30}\)

In the late 1970s, Thompson’s ferocity found a new target, Louis Althusser, a French theorist whose creative revision of Marxism drew inspiration from linguistic structuralism. Althusser argued that human consciousness was ensnared within a matrix of autonomous ideological discourses that coexisted in a constant state of conflict and contradiction, one occasionally gaining dominance over the others. These discursive codes were disseminated through participation in social life, in particular contact with state apparatus (religion, civil law and education). Ideology functioned to induce an illusionary consciousness of a coherent, unified reality, which did not in fact exist.\(^{31}\)

For Thompson this was a species of repackaged economic determinism that significantly diminished the role of the popular movement and greatly inflated that of the theorist in left-wing politics. When not shuffling mindlessly between discursive formations, ‘the people’ were left dependent on eagle-eyed intellectuals to diagnose and remedy the erroneous beliefs conjured through prolonged ideological exposure. Furthermore, here was a theory that for the most part relegated historical context to providing the conditions in which one discursive formation (otherwise comparatively untouched by its broader context) gained precedence over the others. Thompson’s response came in *The Poverty of Theory* (1979), a blistering polemic which lampooned Althusser’s ‘arid academic scholasticism unleavened by any vital tension with a point of reference beyond itself’.

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enamoured of the aesthetic perfection of its own internal logic. The empirical approach, so despised by theorists, could often present stark challenges to the assertions of these conceptual categories.

So, whilst Samuel had been developing his historian’s craft, first through the Social History Group and later in the HW, Thompson had been battling on the frontline of the epistemological debates. *The Poverty of Theory*, far from being an intervention or entry into the debates, had, therefore, been intended as his last word on the matter, a final payment of dues to 1956. By the time of HW 13 Thompson was weary and irritable with the infighting and divisions amongst the various factions of the left, worn down by the continual defence he was forced to make of his position.

The fierceness of Thompson’s polemic had the effect of obscuring the finer points of his argument. But in judging his performance, alongside his weariness with the issue, it should also be remembered that he was a veteran political activist (with a particular taste for the theatrical) as much as he was an experienced scholar. The political platform is different to the scholarly lectern and utilises different performative skills – colourful and relentless demolition of one’s opponents being just one of them. The extravagant force of his polemical arguments certainly bore more relation to the former than the latter. In a letter to Samuel dated 5 December 1979 Thompson seemed unaware of the drama he had caused (italics are my own words):

> Sorry not to have more time to talk at w/e, and sorry also to be so flustered … It is just that I loathe the cult of the historiographical individual, whether for applause or attack. I thought the evening’s discussion went off less well, and I am still confused as to whether I or the chairman or all of us were at fault. I had intended to say almost nothing until I got the ‘position papers’, and Richard J’s made me cross.

* A line crossed out at this point reads ‘what riled me was (in effect) being admonished’.

33 Ibid., 384.
Here is a corrected and expanded version of what I said ... otherwise the
trumour may go around that I said unfraternal things, which I did not say.
The text is a writing-up of my notes with one or two unnecessary acid-
drops taken out.36

In a second letter dated 18 December 1979, Thompson remained
unrepentant, saying dismissively:

Oh I don’t think there was anything very tragic that Sat night at the
Workshop. I was sorry to learn that tensions had grown up between the
Ruskin students and the journal operation – inevitable I suppose but
very sad.

The letter continued, offering some small crumbs of self-reflection and
explanation:

I was perhaps a bit too blunt.

I agree that there we all were, arguing or discussing together in some
manner, as we haven’t for a long time and this was a gain of sorts. The only
bad thing was the way John Saville37 got received – he shouldn’t have come
“uncle” over people – this provoked a savage generational response ...

I am obsessed with politics at the moment the sense that we could be in
the last year or two of our own peculiar Weimar, the cruise missile and
Trident affairs and so on. I just wish people could get rid of the inward-
turning mentalities and look out again. And I get so cross when I hear again
and again the received modish wisdom about the moralistic, bourgeois
character of the CND – which did actually impinge for a moment upon
the world of power.38

Aside from the literal content of these letters, the general tone of them
reveals Thompson’s frame of mood, his impatience with the lingering
sensitivities between the respective leftist generations and his emerging
political priorities. But what of its recipient? Where did Samuel stand in
relation to these debates about socialism, critical theory, history and the
role of the socialist intellectual?

History Workshop 13, People’s History and Socialist Theory, 1979, 039, RSA. See Thompson,
‘The Politics of Theory’, 405.
37 John Saville was a fellow speaker at the event who received a hostile reception for his critique of
cultural theory.
38 E.P. Thompson letter to Raphael Samuel, 18 December 1979, RS 7: History Workshop Events/
History Workshop 13, People’s History and Socialist Theory, 1979, 039, RSA.
His most intensive engagement with these matters came through the *History Workshop Journal (HWJ)*. Launched in 1976, the journal had started out in the much ‘colder’ political climate of the mid-1970s than the optimistic birth of the HW in the late-1960s. Nevertheless, the original intention behind the *HWJ* was to act, in effect, as an extension of the HW meetings, one that retained its radical and experimental spirit but also enabled a closer engagement with the issues that time and the format of the meetings could not accommodate. This intent was reflected in the manifesto:

> Like the Workshop, like the pamphlets and books in the Workshop series, the Journal will address itself to the fundamental elements of social life – work and material culture, class relations and politics, sex divisions and marriage, family, school and home. In the Journal we shall continue to elaborate these themes but in a more sustained way …

The founding editorial board was made up of a mixture of historians, including former Ruskin students Sally Alexander, Alun Howkins and Stan Shipley, and former participants of the Social History Group, including Tim Mason and Gareth Stedman Jones. Samuel and Anna Davin (now separated as a couple) occupied bridging positions between the combined spirits of activism and scholarly critique.

To gain a clearer sense of the *HWJ*’s intellectual, educational and political positioning it is useful to consider it in contrast to two other journals to which it was closely related: *Past and Present (P&P)*, established in 1952; and its close contemporary *Social History (SH)*, also launched in 1976. The relationship to *P&P* was a close one; not only had Samuel been the youngest member of Communist Party Historians’ Group (CPHG) and a student member of the P&P society at Oxford University but Mason worked as an editor on the *P&P* journal. Moreover, the HW owed a considerable intellectual debt to *P&P*, partially responsible, as it was, for advancing and propagating the ‘new’ social history. In other respects, however, the *HWJ* deliberately started out with the intent of assuming a far more expansive and experimental approach to history-making. A brief anecdote concerning the early relations between the two ‘camps’ illustrates this.

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40 Alun Howkins, oral communication with author, May 2012.
In 1968 following HW 2 ‘Education and the Working Class’ Samuel and others drawn from the HW and Social History Group had embarked on a collaborative research project on ‘Nineteenth Century Cromwell’ reported by Mason as a project that, in an echo of Hill’s ‘The Norman Yoke’ (1954), sought to explore nineteenth-century political ideologies through depictions and representations of the Puritan leader Oliver Cromwell. As it unfolded, its vast cast of contributors uncovered an immense array of intriguing but deeply conflicting sources. The emphasis of the work shifted towards a more expansive concern with popular perceptions of the national past. When the enormous quantity of diffuse and eclectic findings was offered to P&P for publication in 1972, the startled journal’s editorial board refused them. The rejection prompted the project’s key coordinators, Mason and Samuel, to reflect on the need to create their own vehicle for publication, one more accommodating towards the experimental and to documenting the actual process of historical research.

The relationship between the intellectual positioning of HWJ and SH was more complex. SH captured something of the evangelical mood rising amongst social historians in the 1970s. Its stated intention was to pursue ‘not a new branch of historical scholarship’ but ‘a new kind of history’, one that cut across the various fields of historical analysis, privileging no single branch in particular, not even class. However, as Jon Lawrence and David Feldman noted, having made this declaration, SH proceeded to make its name through publishing a considerable body of significant work on class formation, class consciousness and class struggle in eighteenth and nineteenth-century England.

The HWJ, by contrast, continued to openly assert the primacy of ‘working-class experience’ (a term left undefined and unexamined) to its historical interests and its objective to relate this to ‘an overall view of capitalism as a historical phenomenon, both a mode of production and

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44 ‘Editorial 1’, Social History, 1, 1 (1976), 1.
as a system of relations’. Its first editions, accordingly, carried lead articles addressing class and the labour process.46 On the other hand, the journal also expressed its interest in the ‘internationality of class experience’, its desire to ‘expand the area of enquiry in new directions’ taking up ‘popular culture, literature, music and art’ and to address ‘theoretical questions in history more explicitly’, carrying an editorial on ‘feminist history’ and a ‘work-in-progress’ essay on homosexuality in the nineteenth century in the first edition.47 The two journals were united in assuming an interdisciplinary posture towards the respective areas of historical analysis, but whilst SH pursued this as a primary and self-conscious objective HWJ did so less from a deliberate intention and more as a result of its nature as a publication.

In its early form, the HWJ occupied a very different cultural space from either P&P or the later SH. Its roots lay firmly in an extramural and activist culture, openly partisan in its politics, aspiring to promote grassroots historical research as well as provide a vehicle for history scholars. It differed from a ‘scholarly’ journal in a number of ways: the space it devoted to the reprinting of original documents and discussion of archival collections, the section on ‘Enthusiasms’ instead of book reviews (intended as a means of ‘practical solidarity’ with the readers, who included labour activists and amateur historians alongside students, teachers and researchers).48 In its physical appearance the contrast was also marked; it carried ‘Fraternal Greetings’ and advertisements from trade unions, notices of events within the left movement, a liberal quantity of lively cartoon illustrations, all calculated to eschew any resemblance to a conventional academic journal. As Stedman Jones later remarked, ‘Its most important characteristic was the pluralism that was built into it from the start’.49

HWJ started off on its mission enthusiastically. An early and immediate point of concern was the relationship between history and sociology, a long-standing issue for Samuel stemming from his days in the first

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47 For example, there were sections dedicated to ‘History on Stage’ and ‘History on Film’. See also Anna Davin’s essay ‘Children’s Historical Novels’, HWJ, 1 (1976), 121–26, 127–35, 154–65. For articles relating to feminism and homosexuality see: Sally Alexander and Anna Davin, ‘Feminist History’; Jeffrey Weeks, ‘Sins and Diseases: Some Notes on Homosexuality in the Nineteenth Century’, HWJ, 1 (1976), 4–6, 211–19.
New Left, and here he formed an important and influential working partnership with Stedman Jones. The first edition carried a joint editorial by the two men announcing the establishment of a working group to scrutinise the relationship between sociology and history.\textsuperscript{50} Despite an earlier call for socialist ‘intellectual imperialism’ in history-making,\textsuperscript{51} Stedman Jones was never fully aligned with the theoretical position of Anderson and the \textit{NLR}. Nor did he welcome the tendency to sweep history up in the service of sociological theory. Rather than proclaim and pursue the ‘failure’ of socialism, his interest lay in the ‘triumph’ of liberal ideas and assumptions among the mass population, which he sought to explore through an integrative, or ‘totalising’, form of historical analysis that brought the social, economic, political and cultural into conversation with one another.

The first substantial product of this inquiry was Stedman Jones’s book \textit{Outcast London} (1971) which sought to explore the gap between Thompson’s heroic radical culture in the early nineteenth century and the uninspiring, deeply conservative working-class community recreated by Richard Hoggart in \textit{Uses of Literacy} (1957) in the mid-twentieth century. Focusing on working-class life and experience in London during the late nineteenth century (incidentally, a similar topic to that of Samuel’s abandoned PhD, ‘unskilled labour in London between 1871–1891’\textsuperscript{52}), he argued that the estrangement from political activity was a product of the material realities of their lives. The uncertainties and spasmodic nature of casual labour and increased domesticity, for example, informed an ‘escapist culture’ of sports, entertainments and drinking (a contrast might be drawn here with Samuel’s irascible, irrepressible Quarry folk whose response to unreliable casual labour was to establish for themselves a thriving ‘secondary’ economy based on what they could glean from their environment, coloured by a robust dislike of authority figures – suggestive perhaps of the subtle distinctions in outlook between the two).\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{50} Raphael Samuel and Gareth Stedman Jones, ‘Sociology and History’, \textit{HWJ}, 1 (1976), 6–8. The group’s critical stance towards sociology meant that it was initially known as the counter-sociology group. Anna Davin ‘The Only Problem Was Time’, \textit{HWJ}, 50 (2000), 244.
\textsuperscript{52} Brian Harrison, ‘Interview with Raphael Samuel’, 23 October 1979.
Despite the intentions expressed in the manifesto, *HWJ* soon found itself drifting more emphatically towards the intellectual and theoretical side of the equation.⁵⁴ For a journal which took such an openly political stance in relation to its approach to history, it was inevitable that it would soon be drawn into the epistemological storms that dominated discussion amongst the intellectual left. It would have been strange, irresponsible even, for the journal not to have acknowledged and engaged with the questions being posed.

The 1978 publication of Richard Johnson’s article (*HWJ*, 6) marked this more definitive entry into the realms of the theoretical. Johnson’s article amounted to a developmental trajectory, or generational narrative, of British Marxist historiography. In Thompson, he proposed, there had been a fundamental break from an older school of Marxism, represented by Maurice Dobb, primarily applying a Marxist critique and analysis of British history. *The Making of the English Working Class* had signalled an important departure by examining the role of culture in actively constituting social and political consciousness. This ‘turn’, however, had been limited by the ‘humanist moralism’ of his ‘generation’. Johnson urged the need to consider this more fully from the other direction, how consciousness was constituted in the interests of ruling ideologies, how it was imposed and disseminated through social life and everyday practices. In short, he proposed a synthesis of the analytical ‘long view’ typical of Dobb’s older generation, with astute attention to cultural moments as a site of political struggle.⁵⁵

The article prompted a wave of critical articles in response. Some, like Keith McClelland and Tony Judt, saw too great an artifice and over-reliance on social theory in the ‘positions’ sketched out in Johnson’s trajectory.⁵⁶ Others, such as Simon Clarke, found points of agreement with the outline proposed by Johnson but differed on the question of its significance – arguing that Thompson had represented a break with older

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forms of Marxist historiography, not simply through his engagement with culture, but in restoring an essentially moral character to political analysis, a reminder of its roots in lives of real people.\textsuperscript{57}

In the mid-1970s Samuel was still uncertain of his ideas about the nature of the relationship between history and theory. The editorial in the edition that carried Johnson’s paper expressed a similar scepticism towards the reliance on critical theory in history. But his thoughts on this matter were not as yet fully resolved. When asked ‘what is socialist history?’ in an interview with Brian Harrison in October 1979, he stumbled and evaded the question: ‘It’s an awfully big question, Brian. No, I think it’ll lead us off into a different track to this. It’s too big a question’.\textsuperscript{58}

What he made clear was his rejection of an earlier definition of ‘socialist history’ offered in the first HW book collection:

\begin{quote}
I mean, I say ‘the job of the socialist historian is keeping the record of the oppressed …’ and I don’t know how that came about, and it certainly wasn’t one that we’d been using before then quite explicitly like that …\textsuperscript{59}
\end{quote}

As these debates rumbled on, grappling with increasingly complex theoretical positions, the gap between the concerns of the intellectuals and academics and those of the Ruskin student constituency widened. The Ruskin students, so central to the ethos and organisation of the Workshops, felt increasingly alienated by the more rarefied tones that the debates were taking and as a result a sense of distance developed between the student collectives responsible for organising the Workshops and HWJ’s editorial collective. This was reinforced by the failure of members of the editorial collective, due in part to overwhelming academic workloads, to actually attend many of the HW meetings and conferences.\textsuperscript{60}

HW 13, ‘People’s History and Socialist Theory’, was conceived to address these issues. Not only was it an opportunity to bring these strands of debate into a shared space for mutual discussion, it was also an opportunity for the HWJ editorial collective to restore relations with the Ruskin students

\textsuperscript{57} Simon Clarke, ‘Socialist Humanism and the Critique of Economism’, \textit{HWJ}, 8 (1979), 138–56.
\textsuperscript{60} Raphael Samuel, ‘Post Mortem of HW 13’, RS 7: History Workshop Events/History Workshop 13, People’s History and Socialist Theory, 1979, 039, RSA.
by working more closely with them in the organisation and running of the HW; but, despite the good intentions, this was problematic from the very start. The Ruskin student collective had intended (Samuel noted wapishly, ‘for once off their own initiative’)\textsuperscript{61} HW 13 to be on the theme of ‘State and Repression’, but after a meeting with Samuel and Mason, representing the collective, they were persuaded to change themes. Despite their acquiescence, the students had misgivings. There were further problems and tensions throughout the organisational process for the HW. Both students and speakers alike missed meetings. The students also failed to raise much enthusiasm for their own contribution to the conference, ‘Worker-Historians in the 1920s’.

What eventually transpired was a hugely ambitious conference that sprawled across multiple issues, and involved a vast cast of intellectuals, historians and students who spanned multiple interest groups and generations. Whilst there were strands on the methodological issues relating to local and oral history, and discussions devoted to the availability or conditions to be found in labour archives, all questions and issues that the HW ‘movement’ had made so much their own, there were also strands dealing more directly with the theoretical conceptions of colonialism, of feminism, of fascism and their relationship to history. There was also a far greater sense of internationality at this Workshop than at previous meetings, with a number of the speakers, such as the French philosopher Jacques Rancière, travelling from overseas to participate and entire streams devoted to ‘African History’ or ‘Socialist History in Europe’.

The Saturday-evening session between Thompson, Hall and Johnson had been shocking, but it was far from this alone which had caused such heightened tensions. Feeling that the conference was becoming increasingly preoccupied with theory, the disgruntled Ruskin students, in true Ruskin tradition, had proposed to break away and set up an independent Workshop to focus more exclusively on labour history.\textsuperscript{62} The bad feeling stirred up by the conference was not confined to the students but went so far across the broad array of the HW participants that it really seemed to throw genuine doubt as to whether any sort of unified and constructive conversation could be achieved. Either way, it spelt the end of the HW’s home at Ruskin College.

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.
The sheer size, scope and ambition of the conference had seen variations of Marxist critical theory converge and combine with history and other forms of left-wing politics in multiple forms. It had also involved the collision of generations, of social backgrounds, and intellectual disciplines. It had been both tremendously exciting in its scope and diversity, but also intimidating and overwhelming for many of its participant members. Even for its moving force and driving spirit, Samuel, the arch-organiser, the problem of retrieving from the intellectual and emotional fragments some basis for common ground, some shared position from which to move forward, was an extremely complex, almost impossible, task particularly when he was far from assured on the questions himself.

History and theory

The extent of the fragmentation in evidence and the high emotional context in which this played out posed no greater test for Samuel’s organisational skills. His position was a delicate one. He felt a strong sense of loyalty to the students but equally he felt this loyalty to the editorial collective and was not uncritical of some of the students’ hostile attitudes to ‘intellectualism’ and theory. In terms of the ‘debate’ that had taken place, Hall was an old friend dating back to his student days at Oxford. Thompson too was also a long-standing comrade. In regard to the wider conflicts and disputes, several of the feminist positions advanced, for example, came from his close friends or even former partners. Moreover, his concern was not simply to navigate the politics of friendship and alliance, but to attempt to find the basis of common ground between the disparate positions in order for the ‘left’ as a whole to move forward as an effective voice and force for social critique and change.

In his initial response, Samuel avoided becoming a direct ‘protagonist’ in the debates as Thompson had been. He had not directly intervened during the conference, although it is suspected that he was responsible for the cancellation of the scheduled plenary session due to take place the following day. An indication of his views can be discerned in a drafted readers’ letter for the HWJ in which he appeared broadly to align with Thompson (as he had, broadly, in the Sense of Classlessness debate in 1959):

63 Carolyn Steedman, oral communication with author, May 2013.
Dear Comrades,

The Making of the English Working Class originated not, as Richard Johnson supposes, from a disenchantment with Stalinism, or economism, but from a split in the old New Left. This split saw Edward Thompson representing ‘history’, the labour movement, and class struggle on one side of the divide, Stuart Hall … and Raymond Williams … representing ‘culturalism’ on the other. …

After taking Williams to task … he ended up by declaring that the ‘sociologists’ had given their version of the … it was now for historians to offer their alternative.

…

Then would follow some 2,500 words on the The Politics of the Making of the English Working Class.64

This signalled his essential agreement with Thompson’s argument against Johnson (if not the style in which it was made), but the details of his interpretation of The Making of the English Working Class did not materialise. The 2,500 words never followed and the letter was not published, quite possibly a tactful decision considering the steady stream of complaints from distressed workshop participants in response to the confrontation.

What Samuel did do in the immediate aftermath of the HW was a detailed ‘post mortem’ on the event where he called upon the analytical and reflective skills of the experienced organiser (and social historian) to systematically dissect the various long- and short-term factors that had contributed to the calamity. As detailed as this document was, he deliberately avoided mentioning the ‘confrontation’, stating in a hand-written ‘PS’ on the document: ‘I have not speculated on the effects on the HW of the Saturday night debate on The Poverty of Theory’.65

This indirectness of his initial response, however, did not mean that he did not have a position on the relationship between history and theory. Whilst a gesture towards this can be discerned in his discarded readers’ letter,  

65  Raphael Samuel, ‘Post Mortem on HW 13’, RS 7: History Workshop Events/History Workshop 13, People’s History and Socialist Theory, 1979, 039, RSA.
something more of it can be seen in his editorials ‘People’s History’ and ‘History and Theory’, written for the book collection of the conference papers, *People’s History and Socialist Theory* (1981).

Whilst the content of these editorials had first been published as the editorial for *HWJ*, 6 (which carried Johnson’s critique of Thompson’s socialist humanism) and accredited to the *HWJ* ‘editorial collective’, they appeared in *People’s History and Socialist Theory* under Samuel’s name alone. Ostensibly, they were dedicated to outlining the subject matter of the book but at the same time they were also highly strategic documents. Given the HW ‘general editor’ was first and foremost an educational role, the editorials had a pedagogic function in explaining to an uninitiated student readership the complex terms and ideas invoked in the course of the debates and doing so in a straightforward style of prose. At the same time, they also went some way towards smoothing over the ruptures that had emerged between contending political–intellectual positions. By contextualising the various perspectives on offer, tracing their development and acknowledging both their strengths and weaknesses, he gave a subtle reminder that all ideas were products of their times and that they were inevitably subject to change. The subtext for these documents was that history, as a form of critical social knowledge, could, and should, accommodate a wide range of approaches without the need for one to dominate.

The editorial on ‘People’s History’ took the form of a historiographical survey of the term’s various European incarnations. Starting out from the early nineteenth century (considerably pre-dating the recent ‘discovery’ of ‘history from below’), he surveyed its uses and appropriations at different times and from different political perspectives. Out of this diverse, politically and culturally pluralist set of incarnations, he discerned subtle linking filaments:

> People’s history, whatever its particular subject matter, is shaped in the crucible of politics, and penetrated by the influence of ideology on all sides … Each in its own way represents a revolt from ‘dry as dust’ scholarship and an attempt to return history to its roots, yet the implicit politics in them could hardly be more opposed.⁶⁶

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Samuel concluded with a repeat rendition of the totemic Brecht poem ‘Questions From a Worker Who Reads’ (1935) to re-emphasise his point that people’s history was, fundamentally, a claim for recognition, a voice for the otherwise muted figures condemned to the backdrop of history’s *tableau vivant* that not only expanded upon the weave of history but actually changed its course. The contrast between his account and Peter Burke’s paper ‘People’s History or Total History’ is illuminating. Burke, at that time a tutor at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and member of the *HWJ* extended editorial committee, followed in recognising the roots of people’s history in early nineteenth-century Europe. The limits of this project, he argued, lay in its lack of integrated analysis between social life and politics (not remedied until before Marx and Engels), and a selective reading of ‘the people’, endowing one particular group with an ‘epical’ historical role or destiny, at the exclusion of others. On this second issue he saw some parallel with contemporary forms of people’s history:

> The epic approach to people’s history still survives. The work of Edward Thompson, Christopher Hill and Raphael Samuel has this epic quality, a quality which is one of their great virtues. … At the same time, this epic approach involves some grave dangers. It’s terribly easy to slide into a struggle between virtue and vice …

He concluded with three cheers, the first for the recognition of social structures as political, the second for restoring the dignity to ‘ordinary people’, the third he reserved for a future move towards ‘total history’, in which the distinction between them and us is at last obliterated. Where Samuel (the former activist) had seen ‘people’s history’ by its very definition as intrinsically and inescapably political, a tool in a battle of ideas, Burke (the professional academic historian) felt that, as an intellectual project, people’s history was hampered in its development by such partisanship.

Samuel’s editorial on ‘History and Theory’ was a recapitulation of the position that he had worked out with Stedman Jones in their joint editorials on ‘History and Sociology’. Theory could have a narrowing effect referencing a small number of canonical texts used as a talisman. It could be self-referential, leading to exclusivity and esotericism, involving a ‘good deal of posturing’; the purpose of which, he could only surmise, was ‘that of keeping an uncomfortable world at bay’ unchecked by anything.

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67 Peter Burke, ‘People’s History or Total History’, in *People’s History and Socialist Theory*, 7–8.
68 Ibid.
outside of itself. It could lack critical self-awareness of its own historical context of production: ‘theory is not something ready-made, waiting for us to adopt in the form of ‘hypotheses’, ‘models’ or protocol. Like any other intellectual artefact, it has its material and ideological conditions of existence’.69

That said, critical theory had performed an important role in opening up historical research and challenging the dominance of a complacent empiricism, expanding both the range of subjects studied and the analytical approaches with which to view them. It had also provided an important critical tension necessary in the writing of people’s history:

Left to itself, people’s history can enclose itself in a locally defined totality where no alien forces intrude. It can serve as a kind of escapism, a flight from the uncertainties of the present to the apparent stabilities of the past.

Provided theory was used as a tool, a point of departure rather than the central object of historical analysis, then it had value. As Samuel phrased it: ‘The theoretical worth of a project is not to be gauged by the manner of its expression, but by the complexity of the relationships it explores’.70

**British Marxist historians**

Complex relationships were the focus of Samuel’s essay ‘British Marxist Historians 1880–1980’, which appeared in *NLR* four months after HW 13.71 Whilst the essay responded directly to the debates which had played out in *HWJ* and HW 13, the work had a much longer genesis, reaching back to the proposed articles ‘The Marxist Interpretation of History – Can it be rewritten?’ and ‘The Liquidation of the Thirties’, promised for the earliest editions of the *Universities and Left Review* and never fulfilled. Some 20 years on from that time, both question and proposition were no less difficult and emotive.

Samuel broached the attempt by suggesting a different framework for the debate that abandoned such an intensively text-based focus:

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69 Samuel, ‘People’s History’, in *People’s History and Socialist Theory*, l.

70 Ibid., li.

In recent years there has been vigorous debate amongst Marxists on fundamental questions of theory but the debate has turned largely on the epistemological status of Marxist concepts, rather than their historical or political determinations … Such exegeses while opening up a space for theoretical disagreement within the Marxist tradition, have also served to reinforce the notion of texts which exist, in some sort, independent of their time and place.

[S]o far from being immune to exogamous influences, Marxism may rather be seen – in light of its history – as a palimpsest on which they are inscribed.72

Drawing upon his encyclopaedic knowledge of Marxist culture and history, his investigation unfolded through thematic sections, allowing him to tease out entangled issues: ‘I Mutations in Marxism’, ‘II Radical Democratic History’, ‘III Protestantism and Non Conformism’ and ‘IV Scientific Rationalism’. His concern was not British Marxist historiography as a single entity advancing through various developmental stages, but as an ensemble of ideas inhabiting distinct social, political and cultural spaces:

The Marxist notion of scientific explanation in history may be said to have gone through a whole number of epistemological breaks. In one phase it was associated with a paradigm of biological necessity, in another with notions of technological determination, in a third with a sociology of class.73

The significance given to particular periods in British history was equally shaped by external contexts: ‘[F]orty years ago the heaviest concentration of Marxist historical work was in the field of 16th and 17th England’ or ‘[T]he preponderance of classical history in early Marxist work, may be said to reflect, in some sort the centrality of classics in literary discourse and higher education’.74 Furthermore, Marxist historiography had not existed in a political-intellectual vacuum but in conjunction with other radical traditions. The ‘people’s history’ of the 1930s and 1940s, for example, was inherited from an earlier ‘liberal-radical version’: A.L. Morton’s *A People’s History of England* (1938) was modelled directly on

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72 Ibid., 21–24.
73 Ibid., 24–25.
74 Ibid., 26, 30.
J.R. Green’s *Short History of the English People* (1877). Similarly, the work of prominent historians such as R.H. Tawney, the Hammonds and the Webbs, none of whom were Marxists, had all provided major stimulus.

Radical religious traditions had also shaped British Marxist historiography. Dissenting and non-conformism was a recurrent preoccupation: ‘Puritanism itself and the study of religious sectarianism … has been responsible for some of the most interesting work within the Marxist tradition in Britain’.75 More than this, religion had also been a deeply informing factor for individual Marxist historians:

Three of the most widely-read Marxist historians writing today – Christopher Hill, E.P. Thompson and Sheila Rowbotham – had a Methodist or part-Methodist upbringing, being educated at leading Methodist schools, and it may well be that a study of personal formation would show many other Marxist writers and historians with a non-conformist or evangelical background only a generation away.76

This recognised the importance of the psychological and emotional landscapes of Marxist historians and even some purchase on their behaviour: ‘Thompson has always used history as his pulpit. His opening salvoes are often no less exhortatory than his concluding apostrophes … there is always, in the end, a fundamental moral issue at stake’.

The article answered the question he had posed in 1956: could Marxist history be rewritten? Yes, it had been in a constant state of rewriting since its inception. The matter of ‘the thirties’ however, still hovered in the air. In his concluding passages he seemed to reach towards it:

The Communist Party Historians’ Group of the 1940s and early 1950s saw history essentially as an epic with classes fulfilling (or failing to fulfil) their historically appointed mission. The science of history was pivoted on laws of development: humanity moved forward in a progression from point to point, until with the achievement of socialism, pre-history ended and real history began. To-day’s Marxist historians have abandoned such overall evolutionary schemes, without offering any comparably unified view in its place. But they have not abandoned the materialist explanation of cause.77

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75  Ibid., 42.
76  Ibid., 43.
77  Ibid., 95.
He went on to say that rather than approaching this in terms of ‘cause and effect’ analysis, contemporary Marxist historians found it more fruitful to reflect on disjuncture; why what was expected to happen did not. But if Marxism as an evolutionary schema was no longer convincing, as a mode of materialist critique it still had much to yield. What brought Marxist historians together across the ages, affiliations, and conceptual languages was the ethical intention behind their respective analyses: to bring to light concealed relationships that underpinned conditions of social being; that shaped, or organised social consciousness and gave rise to social inequalities and injustice.

The treatment was disappointingly brief. The article, admittedly ‘part one’, had furnished a rich background up until the 1950s, but there were still only glimpses of his views on the CPHG, obscured by being scattered amongst the thematic headings. The current state of Marxist historiography was little more than a concluding thought (or a point of departure for a later instalment).

Inevitably, the second article did not appear, but in Samuel's notes and drafts for the topic, material discarded from the first and draft passages clearly intended for the second, there are some clues as to what his thoughts on the subject were, not least of which can be gleaned from the manner, as much as the content, of his prose. Whilst his editorials and article had, necessarily, taken a moderate tone, with barbed remarks subdued for the sake of comradeship, in his personal notes there was a glimpse of a steelier, angrier side to the otherwise genial Workshop historian.

His notes on the CPHG reflected as much upon the fractures amongst the group as it did upon its unity, critically pointing to the divide between middle-class aspiring academics and the wider socialist movement:

’There is no doubt that the Party Historians’ Group completely underestimated the potential of labour history, the major growth point of socialist work in the following years …

This was partly, and in an ultimate sense, because of the uncertain relationships with what was an overwhelmingly middle class body, with very few members recruited from the working class or the labour movement homes … the great majority were first generation socialists drawn from
the comfortable middle class and despite their utter devotion to the labour movement there remained a huge cultural distance ... The group studied the revolutionary tradition but they did not study strikes.  

Elsewhere:

Another great weakness which was also the site of division with the group was local history. Betty Grant almost alone when she joined the group produced a remarkable document ... Lip service was paid to this and she soldiered on with Our History.

But if one compares the local history bulletin and Our History ... this looks a very poor relation compared to the ambitious Past and Present.

Thus at two points where the group might have helped out of the Party's political isolation they failed. The only bridge which had been successfully built in the Cold War years was that to the non-party scholarship ... it is not surprising that in the following decade, numbers of members crossed it.  

A handwritten note of an oral conversation with Dorothy Thompson (dated 20 January 1980) records Thompson's description of Grant as ‘a nutter’. The question of a growing tension between the ‘academic’ and ‘popular’ agendas of the group recurred elsewhere: ‘This gravitational uppull to the universities was also a cause of considerable strain within the historians' group. It proved difficult and indeed impossible to contain the pressure of research within the group’s boundaries’.  

Further handwritten asides dwell further on the nature of the ambitions animating some amongst the founders of Past and Present: ‘P&P [Past and Present] epoch making [another sentence not legible] Belligerently professional’. This belligerent professionalism, he conjectured, arose directly from the deeply defensive position that Marxist historians working within the universities found themselves in and, as a result, were forced to expend considerable energy in addressing:

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78 Raphael Samuel, ‘Notes on Communist Party Historians Group’, Samuel 134/British Marxist Historians, RSA.
79 Ibid.
80 Ibid.
81 Ibid.
When it came to the discussion about bourgeois histories there is no doubt that the historians considered themselves engaged in a species of ideological class struggle, in which Marxist truth was engaged in heroic combat with bourgeois error.82

Samuel's notes on the contemporary situation within British Marxist historiography shifted even more emphatically in tone towards argument rather than analysis:

The creation of an alternative history has much to offer and has already achieved much. But an oppositional history, one which would challenge both bourgeois thought and reach out to a wider constituency has still to come … they will need to take a lesson from the CPHG … find more collaborative methods of work, be more supportive to each other and deliberately map out major themes. The HW [History Workshop] is doing this but it is too infrequent …83

It is clear from this that a springtime of disjointed histories was not the summit of Samuel’s ambition. These, whilst important, had still, somehow, to be brought together, their differences transformed from so many internal divisions into a shared, multilayered, social critique. On the means towards achieving that, however, his subsequent notes betrayed a depth of feeling yet to be ‘edited’ for public consumption:

The Marxist history that emerges from the Birmingham Centre of Contempt Studies [Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies] – a hot house of theoretical – self consciously setting out naturalise French Marxist structuralism will necessarily be very different from the one that emanates from the kitchens of Spitalfields and L. Pimlico or the terraces of World’s End and Wolwroth – the characteristic habitats of the History Workshop Collective.

Part of the handwritten addition here read: ‘Urgently need to be empirically as well as conceptually informed’.

82 Ibid.
83 Raphael Samuel, ‘Notes on British Marxist Historiography’, Samuel 100/British Marxist Historians, RSA.
The next paragraph continued:

In recent years the scholarly mode has been no less influential on all kinds of books which bear the marks of the PHD even when they take on an explicitly Marxist problematic as with RQ Gray and Gareth SJ …

The use of metaphor in the passage bears further comment. The reference to the ‘kitchen’, the ‘terrace’ and ‘the characteristic habitats’ invoke warmth and a homely everyday-ness. Furthermore, they are common spaces used or traversed by many. In contrast is the ‘hot house’, creating, under controlled conditions and under great pressure, an artificial, self-enclosed environment for the growing of things that are not organic (indigenous) to the area. Similarly, ‘the scholarly mode’ and the capitalised ‘PHD’ gesture towards a formalised approach, the warmth of the former juxtaposed to strong effect against the coldness of the latter.

Above all, these notes repeatedly identified the disconnection between intellectuals and the wider movement (or, more expansively, the wider constituency) as the most pressing issue on his mind. Tucked away at the bottom of a page riddled with sentences trialled and discarded in the struggle for expression (‘None of this can be done if historians regard their prime interests…’, ‘All this depends on who history…’), one lone line reads poignantly: ‘Epistemological question that is also a political one: who are you writing for and why?’

These were, of course, just notes and drafts. It would be unfair to infer too much from them, after all he did not publish them in this form. They do, however, reinforce something of the complexity of Samuel’s positioning in relation to the British Marxist historiographical tradition and the generations of the left. On the one hand he was, quite literally, a physical connecting thread throughout the generations, the schoolboy member of the CPHG, a key New Left organiser and activist, the HW historian. His major historical project, an oppositional people’s history, had its roots deep in the politics and political agenda of the Popular Front. Like his account of British Marxist historiography, his historical imagination had been continually revised, his histories rewritten, in relation to the wider contexts in which he lived and worked.

84 Raphael Samuel, ‘Notes on British Marxist Historians’, Samuel 135/British Marxist Historians, RSA.
85 Ibid.
On the other hand, these notes demonstrate the insufficiency of generations as a dividing concept on its own. It was not only his age but his entire set of priorities that were distinctive. Samuel was first and foremost a communist activist. Whilst hardly from a conventional ‘labour movement home’ himself, from his childhood he had been entrenched in a highly disciplined party life in a way that others amongst his contemporaries had not. Some of his phrases even recall those of Rajani Palme Dutt (italics my own): ‘The intellectual who has joined the Communist Party … should forget that he is an intellectual and remember that he is a Communist’. In many respects, this was exactly what Samuel was, not through slavish adherence to a particular view of history or incarnation of a social theory, but in his commitment to work within, amongst and for a wider movement, however diffuse and elusive in definition that movement had become.

**Left reflecting**

This reflectivity on left-wing cultures continued throughout the following decade, gaining greater urgency by events such as the formation of Solidarity in Poland (1980), the first trade union not to be controlled by the ruling Communist Party. Samuel recalled of this:

> I think that Poland was very shocking to me, the Solidarity. I think that was a kind of a firmer point of rupture with me: of seeing that Communism actually didn’t have anything particularly to do with the mass movement any more, and to that extent I [felt] much colder towards it.

It was not only events in Europe. Domestically, the ongoing internal disputes amongst the Labour Party raised further questions amongst the left. In 1981, Samuel and Stedman Jones collaborated on an article, ‘The Labour Party and Social Democracy’, which set out to challenge:

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The overwhelming sense among the Party faithful that it had, from the moment of its foundation, been fundamentally the same sort of people, the same sort of struggles, the same geography of power, the same organisations.88

In place of this, they called for work towards a more complex account that took as its starting point the history of Labour Party politics as ‘a perpetually shifting fulcrum between contending and initially extra-party pressures from left and right’.89

Both men made good on their own critique, going some way towards pursuing this in their own work. For Stedman Jones, the fruits of this could be seen in Languages of Class (1983) in which he drew upon cultural and linguistic analysis to show the different ways in which conceptions of class and class politics had been constituted and reconstituted over time.90

Samuel, characteristically, plied his histories through non-academic mediums such as The Guardian and journals the New Statesman and New Socialist. He penned letters challenging the ancestral appeals and omissions made by the Labour Party and the newly formed Social Democratic Party (SDP). The Labour MP Tony Benn, he argued, was too quick to claim the party as inheritor for all the various and contradictory traditions of opposition and dissent. In invoking R.H. Tawney as a political forefather, the SDP were wrong not to acknowledge the Christianity that had underpinned the former’s socialist vision. He wrote articles such as ‘The Vision Splendid’ on the utopian roots of late nineteenth-century socialism and ‘Enter the Proletarian Giant’ on the early twentieth-century shift towards the ‘muscular’ language and aesthetic of the industrial worker, both further contributions towards an expansion and contextualisation of the ‘socialist tradition’.91

Across this body of work, Samuel’s theoretical conceptions were largely implicit, evident in the nature of his approach rather than clearly stated. He did, however, return to the question of theory in a two-part article,

89 Ibid.
‘Reading the Signs’, addressing the implications of the cultural and linguistic turn more fully.\textsuperscript{92} His arguments were familiar: this debate was not new but had ‘echoes of the dispute between nominalist and realists in the middle ages or for that matter the Sophists and Plato in Ancient Greece’; reading the signs could be an overdetermined exercise placing the intellectual in an elevated position of authority; representation should not be the sole object of historical research; ‘getting up stuff’ was what historians did best.\textsuperscript{93}

His treatment of Michel Foucault, the French cultural theorist turned historian, revealed more of his own position. If Thompson had used Louis Althusser as a point of comparison, Foucault served a similar function for Samuel. Foucault used history to illuminate the relationships between knowledge, truth and power. It was not, he argued, the traditional elites that now wielded this power but the emerging ‘professional’ ones: managers, administrators, teachers, doctors, lawyers, psychiatrists and officials. Adopting an ‘archaeological’ approach, his radical histories of psychiatry, medicine, criminology and sexuality charted how each generated complex discursive systems which served to regulate human behaviour and legitimise social control. This innovative approach proved influential but it was also a bleak perspective.\textsuperscript{94} In his hands, historical analysis did not offer alternatives but served only as a tool for puncturing the illusion of unity by revealing the interplay of discursive structures in the production of knowledge.

Samuel sounded caution against an unexamined embrace of Foucauldian intellectual history, suggesting, provocatively, that for all the emphasis on rupture and difference it had an ironic tendency towards the sort of universalism it claimed to reject, with all pathways leading towards modernity (or post-modernity). What riled the former grassroots activist most was that Foucault’s approach failed to recognise the capacity of (so-called) ‘ordinary people’ to engage selectively and reinterpret what they were told.\textsuperscript{95} By contrast, Samuel’s preferred means of disrupting discursive

\textsuperscript{93} Samuel, ‘Reading the Signs’, 99, 105, 251.
\textsuperscript{95} For a similar argument see Michel de Certeau, \textit{The Practice of Everyday Life} (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988).
unities was through *expansion* as much as deconstruction. By allowing a greater range of voices and perspectives, other histories, he could deflate the supremacy of any one particular claim to truth just as effectively.

He used such an approach in response to the Miners’ Strike (6 March 1984–3 March 1985). The strike, perhaps the most bitter industrial dispute in the twentieth century, shocked the country with its ferocity, tearing communities apart, exposing, again, the deep fractures amongst the political left. In a sign of the changing times, the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) withheld official support from the striking miners and penalised party members who failed to comply with the party line. The result was a split, the first in the party’s 60-year history.96

Samuel reacted by hosting a Workshop with the mining communities affected by the action. The intent was not simply to present an alternative account of the strike, but to provide the people involved the chance to construct their own histories of the event. As the report following the weekend read:

> A lot of the people that attended the weekend thought at the beginning that we at Oxford wanted the information off them to do the recording ourselves, this showed with comments being made early in the week-end such as you will have to come to Grimethorpe to get the feeling of the place. But by the Sunday morning they realised that they were capable of doing it themselves with a little help and backup from the History Workshop Centre.97

This ‘help and back-up’ was provided directly by the event’s key organisers: ‘On a more practical side Raph Samuells [sic] and Anna Davin gave talks showing how peoples history could be recorded by various means such as pictures, pamphlets, books, audio cassettes and video’.98

In the book collection which followed the weekend, Samuel’s introduction did not shy away from advancing sharp insights into the ‘radical conservatism’ shown by some of the miners, noting, for example, the desire to conserve jobs despite the increasing inefficiency of coal mining in 1980s Britain. But he also showed sensitivity (betraying something of

97 ‘Report Back on Miner’s Weekend’, RS 5: Miners Dispute Weekend, 77, RSA.
98 Ibid.
his own sympathies as he did so) to the bonds of loyalty underpinning the mining communities and the disruption to deep structures of identity that the pit closures had precipitated.99

The strike and its repercussions had stirred up other ghosts lurking in Samuel’s sense of identity. The aggressive reaction of the CPGB to the miners and their supporters affected him strongly. Despite the fact he had not been a party member for almost 30 years, he felt that it ‘called into question the worth of my own political commitments’.100 So, just as he had offered the mining communities, he too sought a voice in the debate through history. The ‘Lost World of British Communism’ essays, published in the NLR, were the means by which he finally confronted his view of the CPGB as it was and, more importantly, as it had been in his youth.

Following their publication, the essays were criticised for their chaotic style. His former New Left colleague, John Saville, described them as an incoherent personal sociology and was moved to venture his own memoir about life on the left.101 Dorothy Thompson found them ‘folksy’ and wasted no more of her time on them.102 Certainly, the essays were scattered in nature, often reading like a stream of consciousness in which distinct points became hopelessly entangled. Despite this, the essays constituted an original perspective. Rather than judging the political decisions taken by party management figures, Samuel concentrated on the ways in which political convictions were developed and perpetuated ‘from below’.

Taking as his point of departure the 1940s (Popular Front), the high point of unity within the party and its followers, Samuel examined how that unity had been made possible, the ways in which class politics had been able to colonise bodies; minds and emotions effectively.103 In one section, ‘Metaphysical Space’, he explored communism in terms of its quasi-religious properties; the all-embracing determinism of Marxism replacing the role of providence, the continual appeals made to ‘liberation’ and ‘justice’, the promised redemption of workers’ revolution.

100 Raphael Samuel, The Lost World of British Communism (London: Verso, 2006), 44.
The CPGB itself he contrasted with the functioning of a ‘crusading order’, ‘church militant’. Elsewhere, in sections entitled ‘The Disciplines of Organization’ and ‘The Vocation of Leadership’, he traced how moral strictures were transformed and translated into the physical structures of party life, the distribution and nature of managerial roles assumed by party members, the demands placed upon its rank and file for sustained political activity and intensive political education.

As important to Samuel’s analysis was the CPGB’s relationship to external forces and factors, the historical context of the Second World War providing ‘a sense of burning necessity’, the correlations with the wider cultural ‘moment’ of the 1940s, ‘the zenith of mass society’ where organisation, standardisation and planning were fetishised in a broad ideology of ‘fair shares’. The party not only inhabited these historical spaces, it intermingled with the personal histories of its individual members. In ‘Family Communism’ he offered the experience of his own family by way of example: his mother who found in the party a freedom from the ‘ghetto’ and married life in ‘The Suburb’; communism’s impact on his own fledgling sense of social identity.

Through these distinct but converging contexts, a structure of belief had been generated, made plausible by its positioning within and amongst the contexts that had fashioned it. During the postwar decades the integrity of this structure had come under attack at its connecting points. The events of 1956 had undermined the CPGB’s moral credibility. More critically, class, as the major category of analysis, had become decentralised from political discourse. What had once seemed indisputable was now the source of bitter division.

Whilst not shying away from recognising the delusional mentalities and behaviours implicit in this communist world, he also recognised its valuable qualities: the sense of comradeship and solidarity that developed amongst the members. The essays were littered with Samuel’s fond memories of former comrades who provided mentorship, kindness and guidance to others, including to him (he had only left the party out of loyalty to his

104 Ibid., 45–58.
105 Ibid., 100–20, 121–38.
106 Ibid., 35.
107 Ibid., 9.
108 Ibid., 59–68.
friends rather than from genuine desire). He acknowledged the levels of commitment and dedication shown by party members, particularly in the spheres of self-education. Speaking of these self-taught comrades he said:

[T]heir correspondence … their class syllabuses and lecture notes … testify to their intellectuality, that of a generation of autodidacts, bred in vernacular Marxism, who within the limits and particularities of British national culture have some claim to being considered as an ‘organic’ intelligentsia, of a kind which the Designer Socialists of today, for all their noisy references to Gramsci, can hardly tolerate.109

This comment echoes his first account of the origins of the HW in which he had extolled the levels of commitment shown by the Ruskin students, for no other reward than for the sake of mastering a craft. This sort of independent action, often undertaken against the odds, in a spirit of collaboration, was a recurrent and valued ideal. Out of the rubble of his personal commitment to the party, this was what had survived.

The 1980s was a critical time in the evolution of Samuel’s political and historical thought. Whilst it did not constitute a retreat from his political values, it was, nonetheless, a period of self-reflection. At a 1989 conference, ‘Out of Apathy: Voices of the New Left Thirty Years On’ convened by the Oxford Socialist Society, he made the astonishing concession that he had not wanted to live in a ‘socialist society’ for some thirty years. As for his political convictions, he explained that he had come to view socialism as a metaphor for principles of ‘collectivity, solidarity and opposition’ rather than in any more specific terms.110

The decade following HW 13 brought further significant changes. There were tensions amongst and between both the student body and the management at Ruskin College. Attempts to balance Ruskin’s legacy of critical independent education with a hostile Conservative political climate and unpromising economic situation became increasingly difficult. Nationally, high levels of unemployment placed pressure on further education to be a means of accessing employment (rather than fermenting discontent). Social critique became a luxury few could afford. The HW, meanwhile, left its Ruskin base and became itinerant, touring

109 Ibid., 201–2.
the country. Its principal constituency shifted from universities, adult education and worker students towards polytechnic colleges, community arts centres and local museums.\textsuperscript{111}

Samuel was no longer the central organising figure behind Workshop meetings, although he remained involved, calling Workshops on issues that specifically concerned him. \textit{HWJ}, too, continued to carve out its own path distinct from the HW, increasingly adopting the character of an academic journal in fact if not in name. This was later reinforced by its transition to the Oxford University Press in 1990 following a disagreement with their original publishers.\textsuperscript{112}

The nature of his relationship to the post-1979 HW movement and journal is suggested by his style of writing about it in the \textit{History Workshop: A Collectanea}, a commemorative volume published on the 25th anniversary of the HW in 1991. His editorials on ‘Ruskin Historians’ and the early Workshop are full of detail, anecdote, warmth and humour. By contrast the later editorial ‘History Workshop 14–25’ is sparse in detail, less than two pages in length, and whilst this could have been a simple case of not knowing as much about them as he had done the Ruskin Workshops the tone he used was also cooler, although not unkind:

\begin{quote}
The atmosphere at the provincial workshops is inconceivably more relaxed – partly perhaps because there is more room to move in, less overcrowding. There are no simmering resentments at outsiders coming in … [T]here are no newspapers sellers at the door canvassing for recruits, no theatre of the platform and the floor …\textsuperscript{113}
\end{quote}

These attributes were not bad things, but when contrasted to his affectionate accounts of the discomforts and passions in the early Workshop, it seemed he missed the old fighting spirit.

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{113}] Samuel, ‘History Workshop 14–25’, 146.
\end{itemize}
Samuel’s descriptions of the journal were diplomatic but critical. He acknowledged that the relationship between HW and the journal had quickly bifurcated, each pursuing its own path with little organic connection existing between the two. Considering the *HWJ* as it appeared to him in 1991, his phrasing was revealing:

> The *Journal* is prospering and has what at least to the editors seems a challenging programme of work. It still calls itself a journal of ‘socialist historians,’ though from 1981 onwards … this was qualified and undermined by the addition of the word ‘feminist’ to the masthead.¹¹⁴

The scepticism in this comment is clear, but it is more difficult to interpret its implications. It could be read as the view of an old Marxist unwilling to embrace new forms of cultural politics, such as feminism, and clinging steadfastly to an outdated notion of socialism. On the other hand, perhaps what he really regretted was the lack of a unifying term:

> It is a curious fact that as the Journal has become … less movement orientated it has become more political. Socialism, in the early issues of the Journal, was an adjective rather than a noun. It stood for a diffuse identity rather than a specific platform or line.¹¹⁵

It was his ‘diffuse identity’, and all the openness it entailed, that had motivated the original HW movement.

Samuel’s historical work and interests increasingly took on a London focus. He was closely involved with the London History Workshop Centre (1981) and in preparations for the Festival of London. The group worked on a major project, ‘Exploring Living Memory’, but, in a by now familiar story, their experiences of attempting to work with the Labour-led local council proved frustrating.¹¹⁶ Other activities yielded more pleasant results. Following a Workshop on ‘Romance Fiction’ held at Ruskin College in May 1984, he formed the Popular Literature Group which met at his London home in Elder Street to read and discuss popular literature as a cultural artefact.¹¹⁷ It was through this reading group that he met Alison Light, a literary scholar and critic, whom he married in 1987.¹¹⁸

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¹¹⁴ Ibid., 108.
¹¹⁵ Ibid., iv.
¹¹⁸ Alison Light, oral communication with author, February 2014, Oxford.
HW 13 was significant because of the extent to which it had symbolised the fission and fractures that had long been simmering between political generations, positions and agendas. The debates about the relationship between history and theory had forced the most direct indication yet of Samuel’s view of ‘people’s history’ and the contribution of the critical intellectual. Underpinning all of his responses was a deep conviction that the intellectual had first and foremost to work on the ground: to seek, or create, spaces for dialogue, to forge connections and provide guidance. It was this instinct that underpinned his energetic but highly controversial engagement with the national past and popular memory.
This text is taken from *The Histories of Raphael Samuel: A portrait of a people’s historian*, by Sophie Scott-Brown, published 2017 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.