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An Ingrained Activist: The Early Years of Raphael Samuel

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When Richard Lloyd Jones looked 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 pupil's 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 his young classmate, 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 Raphael 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).

2 Quoted in Sue Smithson, *Community Adventure: The Story of Long Dene School* (London: New European Publications, 1999), 21. See also: Raphael Samuel, 'Family Communism', in Samuel, *The Lost World of British Communism* (London: Verso, 2006), 60; Raphael Samuel, 'Country Visiting: A Memoir', in Samuel, *Island Stories: Unravelling Britain* (London: Verso, 1998), 135–6.

Raphael Samuel (1934–96) was an unconventional historian. A member of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), and later the youngest member of the Historians' Group of the Communist Party (HGCP), in his youth, he left the party in 1956. He was a founding figure in the first British New Left movement and later an adult education history tutor at the trade union – affiliated Ruskin College, Oxford. As a historian, he was best known as the moving force behind the early History Workshop movement (1967–79) and the *History Workshop Journal* (1976–). He was also renowned for his approach to oral and local history, and for his pioneering work in the history of popular culture and public history. Compared to some of his close contemporaries, such as Perry Anderson (b. 1938) or E.P. Thompson (1924–93), Samuel is a relatively neglected figure.³ Where accounts do exist, interpretations are divided. Given his early membership of the CPGB and association with the HGCP, he has naturally been viewed in relation to a trajectory of postwar British cultural Marxist historiography, and here he has often been found wanting. He is described by some as populist and romantic, as a man of a different and dying era ('the last comrade of the first New Left') or, more emotively but still as disingenuously, a confused Marxist, whose work, whilst creative, lacked structure and critical force.⁴

Others, however, present a different perspective, challenging the use of Marxism as a framework for understanding Samuel's politics and history. Ken Jones, for example, has argued that Samuel occupied a 'non-

3 On E.P. Thompson, see: Perry Anderson, *Arguments in English Marxism* (London: Verso Editions, 1980); Scott Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory: E.P. Thompson, the New Left and Postwar British Politics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012); Bryan Palmer, *E.P. Thompson: Objections and Oppositions* (London: Verso, 1994); Harvey J. Kaye and Keith McClelland, eds, *E. P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990). On Perry Anderson, see: Gregory Elliot, *Perry Anderson: The Merciless Laboratory of History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); Paul Blackledge, *Perry Anderson, Marxism and the New Left* (London: Merlin, 2004).

4 Harvey J. Kaye, *The Education of Desire: Marxists and the Writing of History* (London/New York: Routledge, 1992), 99; Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the New Left, and the Origins of Cultural Studies* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 1997); Kynan Gentry, 'Ruskin, Radicalism and Raphael Samuel: Politics, Pedagogy and the Origins of the History Workshop', *History Workshop Journal*, 76 (2013), 187–211, doi.org/10.1093/hwj/dbs042; David Selbourne, 'On the Methods of the History Workshop', *History Workshop Journal*, 9 (1980), 150–61, doi.org/10.1093/hwj/9.1.150; Selbourne, 'The Last Comrade: Raphael Samuel, the Ruskin Historian Who Died Last Week Was the Conscience Keeper of the Old Left', *The Observer*, 15 December 1996, 24; Richard Hoggart, 'Review of Theatres of Memory', *Political Quarterly*, 66:3 (1995), 215–16; Patrick Wright, 'Review of Theatres of Memory', *The Guardian*, 5 February 1995; Stefan Collini, 'Speaking with Authority: The Historian as Social Critic', in *English Past: Essays in History and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 95–102; Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life* (London: Abacas, 2002), 212.

conformist' position in relation to the wider intellectual left. Jones recast his apparent populism into part of a creative and democratic pedagogical politics.⁵ In Samuel's own conception, the Workshop took its stance on the democratisation of history, rather than the reformulation of Marxism, part of an attempt to democratise history and make 'working-class men and women producers of their own history'.⁶ Building on this, Hilda Kean has pointed to the Workshop as a means of expanding both the range of the historical subject matter and those considered to be engaged in historical work. She further contended that it did this by fostering an inclusive and democratic learning environment and demystifying the research process.⁷

These accounts suggest that the Workshop, as a political intervention and educational initiative, relates more to a species of left-libertarian politics, characterised, across its various guises, by an anti-authoritarian and decentralised conception of direct democracy and a view of the individual as an agent for social change. In education, this corresponds with what Susan Askew described as a 'liberatory model'. Whilst primarily concerned with education for social change and social justice, this model considers knowledge as intrinsic (rather than extrinsic), stressing individual change as the prerequisite for larger change and emphasising the need for an empathetic understanding of social relationships. As a mode of teaching practice, it adopts a person-centred approach in which learning is a personalised, reciprocal process and participatory activity. Askew acknowledged that, within this framework, the exact role of the educator can be unclear or unexamined, but generally it involves a shift from an authoritative position to one of facilitation and critique.⁸

5 Ken Jones, 'Raphael Samuel: Against Conformity', *Changing English: Studies in Culture and Education*, 5:1 (1998), 17–26, doi.org/10.1080/1358684980050103.

6 Raphael Samuel, 'Afterword: History Workshop 1966–1980', in Samuel, ed., *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London: Routledge Paul, 1981), 410–17; 'General Editor's Introduction', in Samuel, ed., *The History Workshop: A Collectanea 1967–1991* (Oxford: History Workshop 25, 1991).

7 Hilda Kean, 'Public History and Raphael Samuel: A Forgotten Radical Pedagogy?', *Public History Review*, 11 (2004), 51–62; Kean, 'People, Historians and Public History: Demystifying the Process of History Making', *Public Historian*, 32:3 (2010), 25–38, doi.org/10.1525/tph.2010.32.3.25.

8 Susan Askew, 'Educational Metamorphosis', in Susan Askew and Eileen Carnell, *Transforming Learning: Individual and Global Change* (London: Continuum International Publishing, 1998), 84, 89–91. For this in particular application to history see Jorma Kalela, *Making History: The Historian and the Uses of the Past* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 159–64.

Sheila Rowbotham, an early Workshop participant, endorses the idea of Samuel as a liberatory educator, saying:

Raphael was not simply a writer but a renowned organiser, the kind who was an initiator of great projects with the capacity to yoke his fellow to the concept and carry them on regardless of grizzles and groans ... He was the world's most adept hooker, and ruthless behind the charm.⁹

She added that:

Writers leave visible traces, they contrive their own record. Organisers, in contrast, have a powerful impact upon those within whom they have direct contact but tend to live on in oral memory alone.¹⁰

What made Samuel distinctive as a historian, then, was not a particular argument that he advanced about the past, nor a specific theory of history that he proposed, but his entire *way of being* a historian. As much as reclaiming a radical view of the past, Samuel exemplified a radical approach to the role of the historian. Samuel's politics were enacted through his practices of history as much as in his historical writing. This makes him as an individual as important to 'read' as any of his texts. But, as Rowbotham's comment suggested, personalised and performative practices leave little trace on the documentary record. They are deeply embedded in context, perceived emotionally as much as grasped conceptually. This is where the intimate perspective of the biographical approach can provide valuable insight, situating the individual within a web of their social, cultural and historical relationships and permitting an all-important sense of dynamism, adaption and response, to thinking and acting.

This essay explores Samuel as an intellectual personality distinguished by a remarkable capacity to recognise and galvanise history-making as an everyday social activity and potential tool of social critique. It focuses on Samuel's formative years, from his early communist childhood through to his student years, arguing that it was during this period that he absorbed the values of communism as a moral framework and developed the distinctive intellectual and practical skills of the grassroots activist and aspiring party organiser, highly distinctive from those of the traditional historical scholar or political theorist. These were the values and skills that shaped his later practices as a historian.

9 Sheila Rowbotham, 'Some Memories of Raphael', *New Left Review*, 1/221 (January/February 1997), 128–32.

10 Ibid.

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 Samuel 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. Minna married Barnett Samuel (1906–71), a London solicitor from an orthodox Jewish family, in 1931 and moved to Hampstead Garden Suburb in North London. The marriage was short-lived, Minna and Barnett 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, Minna and Samuel lived in Kentish Town, North London.¹¹

The most-defining feature of Samuel's early upbringing was communist politics, which dominated every aspect of his young life. This 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. 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.¹²

Saville may have intended this remark as a criticism but, in fact, this was the point that Samuel was making in the 'Lost World' essays, rejecting the idea that any sort of uniform experience of communist politics actually existed, that it always entailed a close and complex relationship with other

11 Gareth Stedman Jones, 'Samuel, Raphael Elkan (1934–1996)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

12 John Saville, *Memoirs from the Left* (London: Merlin, 2003), 9.

factors. His own experience was not only that of a Jewish comrade, but also that of a child brought up by a single mother during the war years on the home front. 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 the national communist parties), 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 of the party. The Popular Front replaced the previous policy of 'Class Against Class' (1928–35) in which the respective parties followed a narrowly prescribed class politics at the exclusion of those who did not pursue this line.¹³ In adopting this policy in 1928, the CPGB had differentiated itself from the British Labour Party (BLP), the political arm of the British left, by rejecting all gradualist approaches to socialism and aggressively asserting a view of class interests as clear, unified and utterly incompatible with one another.¹⁴ The switch to the Popular Front had been prompted in part by the catastrophic fate that had befallen the Communist Party of Germany. As a result of the 'Class Against Class' line, the German party had become so isolated that they had been incapable of opposing Adolf Hitler's attacks against them. They had subsequently been wiped off the German political spectrum and rendered powerless.¹⁵ 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

13 Matthew Worley, *Class Against Class: The Communist Party in Britain Between the Wars* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2002).

14 See: David Cannadine, 'The Twentieth Century: Social Identities and Political Identities', in Cannadine, *Class in Britain* (London: Penguin, 2000), 126–44; Stuart Macintyre, *A Proletarian Science: Marxism in Britain 1917–1933* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1986). See also Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Culture: England 1918–1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198206729.001.0001. McKibbin argues that the perceived tranquillity of England's interwar (1918–39) social order gravely underestimates the degree of social antagonism that lay below the surface.

15 Jim Fyrth, 'Introduction: In the Thirties', in Fyrth, ed., *Britain, Fascism and the Popular Front* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1985), 9–29; Kevin Morgan, 'The Communist Party and the Popular Front, 1935–1938', in Morgan, *Against Fascism and War: Ruptures and Continuities in British Communist Politics, 1935–1941* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), 33–55.

left. Invocations of a lost 'national' past were a key feature cutting across 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 deeply isolationist 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 membership.¹⁶ Despite the shift in stance, however, the Labour Party remained mistrustful of the CPGB and rejected all overtures towards a united front.¹⁷ The CPGB was, however, more successful in its engagement with the public sphere. One implication of the change was that the party became more attractive to radically inclined intellectuals, writers and artists. Once viewed with hostility as inherently bourgeois, the party now softened its stance, seeing them as important potential weapons in the battle of ideas.

Another fruitful area for the party was its association with the numerous grassroots initiatives that emerged during this period, initiatives 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, which, whilst never explicitly affiliated to the CPGB, harboured strong 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.¹⁸ 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).¹⁹ For a Jewish family such as Samuel's, another important dimension of this increased appeal was the party's strong opposition to all forms of fascism and active campaign against former MP Oswald Mosley and the British Union of Fascists (BUF). Whilst Britain was never in the grip of state fascism as Spain, Germany and Italy were, the BUF's hostility towards migrant

16 Matthew Worley, 'Comrade Against Comrade: The CPGB in Crisis', in Worley, *Class Against Class*, 116–54. James Eaden and David Renton argue that as early as 1931 the Communist Party line had been in transition. James Eaden and David Renton, *The Communist Party of Great Britain since 1920* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 50, doi.org/10.1057/9781403907226.

17 Morgan, 'The Communist Party and the Popular Front', 35–6.

18 Paul Laity, 'Introduction', in Laity, ed., *Left Book Club Anthology* (London: Victor Gollancz, 2001), ix–xxxii.

19 Samuel, *The Lost World*, 66.

communities, including Jewish ones, in the name of a selective vision of the national past was enough to provide a chilling glimpse into the implications of fascist politics.

In September 1936, 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 their planned march.²⁰ The CPGB took a considerable role in organising the protest, offering those frustrated with what was perceived by some as indecisiveness on the part of Anglo-Jewish community leaders (often divided amongst themselves on matters of both politics and religion) an assertive alternative form of leadership.²¹ As Samuel's uncle, the scholar and historian Chimen Abramsky, said later, 'if you were for democracy Communism was the place to go'.²² Strategically, the CPGB's switch proved successful, resulting in a substantial increase in its membership, peaking during the war at 56,000.²³ It was not, however, without tension, creating, amongst the membership, a dualistic, even conflicting, set of demands on both their thought and loyalties. For some, such as Palme Dutt, the party's arch theoretician, this policy of inclusivity and alliance risked obscuring or undermining *class* as the key political category of analysis or critique.²⁴ This concern was further emphasised following the outbreak of the Second World War when class divisions were increasingly overridden by invocations of a British nation unified in defiance of a common enemy.

There was also the question of the relationship to the Soviet Union. On the one hand, the party sought to identify with indigenous political traditions, united by a common commitment to democracy, but at crucial moments it showed an enduring allegiance to Moscow. It refused to condemn communist suppression of anarchist factions in

20 Nigel Crosby, 'Opposition to British Fascism 1936–45', in Crosby, *Anti Fascism in Britain* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 2000), 42–80.

21 David Cesarani, 'Who Speaks for British Jews?', *New Statesman*, 28 May 2012, 23–7. See also James Eaden and David Renton, 'The Zig Zag Left 1928–39', *The Communist Party of Great Britain since 1920*, 58; Raphael Samuel, 'Jews and Socialism: The End of a Beautiful Friendship?', *The Jewish Quarterly*, 35:2 (1988), 8–10.

22 Ada Rapaport-Albert, 'Chimen Abramsky Obituary', *The Guardian*, 19 March 2010. Samuel's mother Minna was also an 'implacable opponent of Oswald Mosley's Blackshirts'. Paul Conway, 'Minna Keal 1909–1999', www.musicweb-international.com/keal/ (accessed 19 June 2014).

23 Noreen Branson, 'Appendix I Communist Party Membership', *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain 1931–1951* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1997), 252.

24 See, for example, Rajani Palme Dutt, 'Intellectuals and Communism', *Communist Review* (September 1932), 421–30.

the Spanish Civil War, its newspaper, *The Daily Worker*, defended the Moscow trials and the party as a whole complied with the implications of the Nazi Soviet Pact (1939), switching to a policy stance of imperial war in August 1939, only returning to a position of ‘social patriotism’ following the Soviet Union’s entry into the war in June 1941. It must be stressed that Samuel would have understood this only indirectly at the time of its actual happening. He was four-and-a-half when the party line changed following the Nazi–Soviet pact in August 1939, six-and-a-half when it changed back in June 1941. Unlike the older members of his family, and several of his contemporaries, Samuel 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. 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, firsthand experiences and perceptions.²⁵

In the first place, Samuel’s communism was a real family affair. Not only his mother 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. If not actual members, many were supportive of radical political positions.²⁶ 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.²⁷ 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 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).²⁸ In all these ways, Samuel became attuned to politics as part of normal everyday life.²⁹

25 Saville, *Memoirs from the Left*, 9.

26 Samuel, *The Lost World*, 63. Some members of Samuel’s family lived in France, others in America.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid., 59–62.

29 Ibid., 61, 66.

This youthful communism also furnished him with an early ethical framework for judging his behaviour and that 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.³⁰ All of this carried firm implications for how to behave both amongst comrades and non-comrades, and provided a structure for how to behave in both public and private.³¹ To this extent, Samuel would later say that communism provided him with a 'complete social identity' that had even greater significance for a child 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 reassuring connotations of the home he had left behind.³² As he grew older, advancing towards more complex forms of abstract thinking, Marxism certainly provided him with a conceptual framework and explanation of the world. In his own words:

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, it 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 prophetic authority.³³

However, the important point here is that initially his communism had been non-theoretical. It had been primarily social and behavioural.³⁴

An important early influence on him was Minna, his mother. Born Minnie Nerenstein on 22 March 1909 in East London, she was raised in a deeply religious household with Yiddish as her first language. She was

30 Ibid.

31 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. Samuel, *The Lost World*, 77–156.

32 Samuel, *The Lost World*, 67–8.

33 Ibid., 49.

34 On communism as providing a 'total identity', see Thomas Linehan, *Communism in Britain: From Cradle to Grave 1920–1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

a bright child, winning a scholarship to Clapton Country Secondary School run by Mrs Harris, a progressive Fabian Socialist. She proved herself to be a talented musician and her talent took her to study at the Royal Academy of Music. Minna was forced to quit her music studies in order to help run the family business following the death of her father Jacob in 1926. Following her marriage to Barnett and their move to Hampstead Garden, she soon found the genteel environs of 'The Suburb' claustrophobic after the bustle of the East End.³⁵ 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 the couple. 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, Minna 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, class tutor and engagements secretary for the Worker's Music Association. For a significant portion of Samuel's childhood, Minna was a one-woman dynamo of public activity, organising, teaching and public speaking.³⁶ Importantly, this was not communism as political theory but as a form of personal and social liberation.

If Minna's influence on Samuel 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

35 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.

36 Samuel, *The Lost World*, 63–8; Raphael Samuel, 'Country Visiting: A Memoir', *Island Stories*, 132–52; Alex May, 'Keal, Minna (1909–1999)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), www.oxforddnb.com.ezproxy.library.uq.edu.au/view/article/73220 (accessed 10 October 2016); Paul Conway, 'Minna Keal: 1909–1999'.

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. He 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 Abramskys' 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.³⁷

In Samuel's later autobiographical writing, a distinction in tone suggests something of his relationship to these two figures. In writing of his mother, whilst not uncritical, he was consistently affectionate and enthusiastic in his depiction of her as a constant whirlwind of energy and activity. The warmth of these portrayals would imply, at the very least, his strong identification with her activities. His writing on his uncle, by contrast, is respectful but much cooler in tone.³⁸ Equally, Abramsky's tribute to him following his death in 1996 was similarly reserved in some of its judgements, describing his nephew as a 'Narodnik' – referencing a nineteenth-century Russian populist movement – in his political views and personal manners.³⁹ These subtleties in tone suggest his attraction to

37 Rapaport-Albert, 'Chimen Abramsky Obituary'; 'Professor Chimen Abramsky: Historian', *The Times*, 19 March 2010; Samuel, *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, *The House of Twenty Thousand Books* (London: Halden Publishers, 2014); Sasha Abramsky, 'The House of Twenty Thousand Books', YouTube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=h37GF-awf0E&feature=youtu.be, June 2014 (accessed June 2014).

38 Samuel, *The Lost World*, 63.

39 A Narodnik was a term used to describe a member of the nineteenth-century Russian populist movement. Chimen Abramsky, 'Raphael Samuel', *Jewish Chronicle*, 17 January 1997.

and admiration for his mother's activism, whilst his more reserved respect for Abramsky's deep intellectualism could, it seems, be a point of division between the two men.

Further proof of Minna's influence can be seen in his early ambition to the role of the party organiser.⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹ His aspiration to this role 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), Samuel might well have aspired to a more 'authoritative' position.⁴² 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' essays, he supplied his readers with 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:

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 ... [and] encouraging new comers to 'express' themselves.*⁴³

40 Brian Harrison, 'Interview with Raphael Samuel', 18 September 1987, transcripts in author's possession, copies deposited at Raphael Samuel Archive (hereafter RSA), Bishopsgate Institute, London; Samuel, *The Lost World*, 88.

41 *Ibid.*, 201.

42 Rapaport-Albert, 'Chimen Abramsky Obituary'.

43 Samuel, *The Lost World*, 125 (emphasis added).

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.*⁴⁴

The role, as he recalled and described it, has some notable features. First, it was an acutely social role dealing directly with people. Second, 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 across as a co-worker, being welcoming and inclusive and so on. Third, 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.

There are two key points to take from Samuel's early childhood communism. First, his earliest encounters with communism were profoundly social, rather than theoretical, in nature, experienced as a way of life rather than a political idea. Second, this Popular Front, wartime communism was heavily characterised by a complex dualism that bore significant consequences for the development of his thinking and behaviour. The party of his youth trod a precarious line between cooperation and critique, between unifying invocations of the nation and the divisive implications of class politics, between loyalty to Britain and to the Soviet Union. The organiser, the role he came to aspire to, further rehearsed this duality, being simultaneously part of but also at a distance from the wider movement. All these factors prompted in him an early but acute self-consciousness in terms of his positioning in relation to others and their positioning in relation to him. Intellectually, it accustomed him to moving deftly between descriptive modes and equipped him with the capacity to continually connect the particular instance with the wider picture that, at this time, was provided by communism as a political cause.

44 Ibid., 125–6 (emphasis added).

The Historians' Group of the Communist Party

The HGCP (1946–56) exemplified something of this dualism in its attempt to integrate Marxist political analysis with a reclaiming of the national past. The group formed in 1948 and contained a mixture of old and young, academic and non-academic historians.⁴⁵ Samuel was the group's youngest member, joining in 1951 as a schoolboy. As Bill Schwarz has argued, the group's work constituted a more substantial theorisation of popular frontism and its call for a battle of ideas.⁴⁶ This was, in part, conveyed through the historical work produced by its members who, it has been argued, laid the grounds for the development of critical cultural history.⁴⁷ A less acknowledged but important dimension of its activities lay in its educational-activist agenda, which aimed to encourage and support history-making as a common social activity and political tool in the battle of ideas. Despite drawing its initial impetus and objectives from the Popular Front, the group worked in very different times, which, inevitably, impacted upon the nature of its work.⁴⁸ The group's working life was conducted against the backdrop of the Cold War, and the increased hostility that this fostered towards British communists, the original enemies within, put even greater pressure on the need to forge direct links between Marxism as a critical political-economic theory and the domestic past.⁴⁹ At the same time, the stark dividing line imposed by the Cold War meant that there was also increased pressure for conformity to the party line. This produced tensions within the party, in particular towards the intellectuals and artists amongst the membership whose work,

45 Eric Hobsbawm, 'The Historians' Group of the Communist Party', in Maurice Cornforth, ed., *Rebels and Their Causes: Essays in Honour of A.L. Morton* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1978), 21–47.

46 Bill Schwarz, "'The People' in History: The Communist Party Historians Group 1946–1956', in Richard Johnson, Gregor McLennan, Bill Schwarz and David Sutton, eds, *Making Histories: Studies in History-writing and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1982).

47 Jim Obelkevich, 'New Developments in History in the 1950s and 1960s', *Contemporary British History*, 14:4 (2000), 125–6, doi.org/10.1080/13619460008581606; Harvey J. Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984).

48 For further discussion of this, see Alastair MacLachlan, *The Rise and Fall of Revolutionary England: An Essay on the Fabrication of Seventeenth Century History* (London: Macmillan 1996), doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-24572-7; Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the New Left, and the Origins of Cultural Studies* (Durham, NC/London: Duke University Press, 1997).

49 See Harriet Jones, 'The Impact of the Cold War', in Paul Addison and Harriet Jones, eds, *A Companion to Contemporary Britain* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 24–6.

naturally, demanded conceptual and creative freedom. Always suspicious of this bourgeois figure, at the peak of Cold War hostilities, the party would make little room for anything suggesting ideological deviation.⁵⁰

Psychologically, the experience of the Cold War, particularly in western countries such as Britain, exacerbated the already profoundly complex situation for party members, caught between their political convictions and their own ethnic identities. Something of this dilemma was illustrated by the CPGB's 1951 shift to 'The Road to British Socialism', an apparently ground-breaking shift away from Moscow, part of an attempt to revive flagging membership.⁵¹ In reality, however, this break was limited, as demonstrated by the party's refusal to allow the HGCP to undertake a historical study of the party and its subsequent failure to publicly critique the decisions and actions of Moscow following the Yugoslav split in 1948 or after the disastrous events of 1956.

As Schwarz suggested, Christopher Hill's essay 'The Norman Yoke' is often seen as emblematic of the group's activities. This essay saw Hill break from his usual terrain of seventeenth-century high politics and turn his attention towards popular ideology.⁵² Tracing the trajectory of popular accounts and invocations of 'The Norman Yoke', he demonstrated how the story had been continually made and remade in line with shifting political agendas and values. He concluded with the argument that only in Marxism were the key political principles of the story, 'the recognition of class struggle as the basis of politics, the deep sense of *Englishness* of the common people', distilled and clarified.⁵³ But, he warned, these principles *needed* the imaginative framework of historical storytelling to garner widespread appeal.⁵⁴ The work of Hill and others with the group offered a bold and compelling attempt at uniting national history with Marxist theory. In pursuit of this more rigorous analysis of the English

50 On the Communist Party and intellectuals, see Andy Croft, 'Authors Take Sides: Writers in the Communist Party 1920–1956', in Kevin Morgan, Nina Fishman and Geoff Andrews, eds, *Opening the Books: New Perspectives in the History of British Communism* (London: Pluto, 1995), 83–101; Andy Croft, 'The Boys Around the Corner: The Story of Fore Publications', in Andy Croft, ed., *A Weapon in the Struggle: A Cultural History of the British Communist Party* (London: Pluto Press, 1998), 142–62. For a source more contemporaneous to the times, see Neal Wood, *Communism and British Intellectuals* (London: Gollancz, 1959).

51 Harry Pollitt, 'The Road to British Socialism', *Looking Ahead* (London: Communist Party of Great Britain, 1947).

52 Christopher Hill, 'The Norman Yoke', in John Saville, ed., *Democracy and the Labour Movement: Essays in Honour of Dona Torr* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1954), 11–67.

53 *Ibid.*, 66 (emphasis added).

54 *Ibid.* (emphasis added).

past, a number of the group, along with other non-Marxist historians, set up the journal *Past and Present* (1952–), which, whilst never a party mouthpiece, proclaimed itself dedicated to the championing of a new, scientific approach to history, an approach that distilled and clarified the colourful events and personnel of history, revealing their connection to deeper shifts in political-economic structures.

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. Moreover he was, at this time, a committed activist and his interest in history was entirely ideological. His excitement was then 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 ignorant of or oblivious to them). It was, therefore, natural that he would be just as inspired by the group's other main *raison d'être*, its educational activities. This manifested not only in the dissemination of its historical work but in the organisation of large events and 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.

Later, in the wake of protracted and heated debates surrounding the trajectory of British Marxism, Samuel, in his private notes, wrote critically on the subjugation of the HGCP's educational work to the historiographical debates taking place amongst the academic membership:

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 and produced a remarkable document [on this] 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*.⁵⁵

A handwritten aside to this:

P&P [*Past and Present*] epoch making [another sentence not legible]
Belligerently professional.⁵⁶

55 Raphael Samuel, 'Notes on Communist Party Historians Group', Samuel 134/ British Marxist Historians, RSA.

56 Ibid.

For Samuel, the HGCP had several important influences. Not only did it demonstrate the importance of history as a crucial tool in the battle of ideas, the work of members such as Hill also showed creativity in traversing between nation, theory and in bringing to the fore focus on popular ideologies as a means of exploring political consciousness. On the other hand, his experiences with the group also left him with a sense of frustration at the degree to which the more prestigious academic battles so often took precedence over the educational-activist agenda.

Oxford student politics

Samuel had long been practising the skills of the aspiring organiser, but it was during his student days that he really began to develop independently his political ideas, practices and values, in particular his skills in recruitment and political organisation. In 1952, he went up to Oxford to read modern history at Balliol College under the supervision of Christopher Hill. Whilst under pressure from the party to be a good student, the majority of his time and efforts were spent on political activity. In this area, his output during this time was tremendous. He was actively involved in both the Oxford town party branch and the university's student group throughout his undergraduate 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.

Samuel, committed to a minority political party that, in the Cold War years, was 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 not only acutely aware of the pragmatic implications of political power but came from families accustomed to exercising it and who, quite reasonably, expected to do so themselves in the future. One strategy he adopted for dealing with these issues was simply to cultivate a considerable flexibility in his political vocabulary. So intently did Samuel attempt to seek out common ground in discussions that he was even willing to adopt the less 'esoteric' political language of liberalism, resplendent with references to that comforting cover-all

concept of tolerance. In the course of this process, he recalled, he could not help becoming ‘a bit liberal’ himself, emphasising the extent to which he truly immersed himself into other people’s political languages.⁵⁷

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 notions that language could be detached from the material conditions and 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 in his critique with those attracted to existentialist philosophy with its austere insistence on existence over essence. It was during this venture that he encountered Charles Taylor, a Canadian philosophy student (and future co-founder of the first New Left).⁵⁸

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 the H-bomb tests that were carried out on Christmas Island in 1953.⁵⁹ His work on this campaign actually took him into a realm outside of the official party policy of this time. He also dedicated a considerable amount of energy on issues relating to anti-colonialism, becoming active in the campaign against the British Government’s deposition of the Guyanese Government in 1954. 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.⁶⁰

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

59 Harrison, ‘Interview with Raphael Samuel’, 18 September 1987.

60 Harrison, ‘Interview with Raphael Samuel’, 20 October 1987.

Apart from these specific campaigns, a more structured example of Samuel's 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 Samuel, 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, pre-empting many of the issues that would later come to preoccupy the first New Left.⁶¹ Hall 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 thinking.⁶² He 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).⁶³ The journal gives some sense of Samuel's interests and political approach during this time. Articles such as 'The Mind of British Imperialism' demonstrated his concern and astute sensitivity towards the internal dynamics of political mentalities and the ways in which these were reformulated over time.⁶⁴

After 1954, however, Samuel 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'.⁶⁵ This discomfort could be construed as an example of his unease with the 'The British Road to Socialism' stance of the CPGB and his absorption of the Cold War Cominform concern to demarcate

61 Stuart Hall, 'The Life and Times of the First New Left', *New Left Review*, 61 (January–February 2010), 182.

62 Stuart Hall, oral communication with author, May 2012, Hampstead, London.

63 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.

64 Raphael Samuel, 'Socialism and the Middle Classes', *The Oxford Left*, Hillary Term (1954); Raphael Samuel, 'The Mind of British Imperialism', *The Oxford Left*, Michaelmas Term (1954).

65 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.

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 also be seen as evidence of his belief in alliance between openly *different* factions amongst the left.

Samuel's 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 later the death of Stalin in 1953, there was a slight thaw in the intensity of the Cold War hostility, which mellowed, marginally, the general feeling towards communists. On becoming the branch secretary of the communist student group, he 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 brought him perilously close to being in direct violation of his instructions from the CPGB, whose relationship with Labour remained profoundly uneasy throughout this time.⁶⁶ The intellectual and emotional constitution of the Labour club students was distinct 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.⁶⁷ 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 political power,

66 Harrison, 'Interview with Raphael Samuel', 18 September 1987. Whilst the CPGB initially sought a close working relationship with the Attlee-led Labour Government, by 1947, after repeated rejections, the party began to criticise Labour Party policy. Following the defeat of Labour in 1951, the relationship remained hostile. See also Keith Laybourn, *Marxism in Britain: Dissent, Decline and Re-emergence, 1945–c.2000* (London/New York: Routledge, 2006), 21–2, doi.org/10.4324/9780203300626.

67 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.

largely because they could more confidently expect to exercise it. More importantly, it had a greater appreciation for the mechanics and apparatus of political power.

And so Samuel immersed himself in a complex world of alliance and negotiation, requiring a clever use of language and a strategic engagement with issues and other political groups. The technique that he most favoured, and utilised above all others, was, however, an even more personal one: the adoption of a self-consciously charming and agreeable public persona.⁶⁸ He later described this situation:

I mean there wouldn't be a minute that I wouldn't be aware that I was a Communist until I left the Communist Party at 22. Anything I did, there would always be a kind of sense that it was in some way forwarding the cause – even if it was something like playing football or tennis or shove ha'penny or just sitting around, because even making oneself agreeable was in some sense making one's unpalatable politics more palatable ... There was a sense of wanting to make the unpalatable palatable by showing a human face. Given that you actually had a politics that was zealous, the one thing you didn't do ... in the Communist Party was be zealous about it because you wouldn't get a hearing for it in a hostile climate.⁶⁹

As this comment suggests, there was no dividing line between political activism and socialising, between politics and personal relationships. Debates would take place over coffee in the common room or rage late into the night in student bedrooms. Quite often they were played as a form of sport involving 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.⁷⁰

Protests, attended by only a handful of people and 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

68 One might view his earlier decision to anglicise his name to Ralph as part of this desire.

69 Harrison, 'Interview with Raphael Samuel', 20 October 1987.

70 Harrison, 'Interview with Raphael Samuel', 18 September 1987.

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.⁷¹

His extraordinary pursuit of Dennis Butt, a fellow student, gives a striking illustration of this. Butt was a mature student and former wool sorter who had come to Oxford University from the independent, trade union – affiliated Ruskin College. A longstanding Labour man, he went on to become a ‘prize recruit’ for the CPGB and one of Samuel’s closest friends.⁷² 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: ‘[M]y effort, which lasted 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.’⁷³ This anecdote, analysed more closely, suggests a rough prototype for Samuel’s later methodology as a historian-educator. First, he worked hard to understand not only the language of labour but also, through forming a close friendship with Butt, to understand the specific ways that Butt as an individual interpreted it. He then translated his own politics into a form tailored specifically to Butt, enabling him to communicate on a deeply personal and meaningful level with the man. This, in turn, allowed Butt to then ‘metabolise’ this politics more readily. Such a process reflects the organiser’s insight into the need to ‘involve’ prospective members and make them complicit in the challenging and changing of their own ideas. It also echoes the sort of pedagogical strategy an effective teacher might use. Another notable dimension to Samuel’s thinking revealed by this anecdote is that this process had an impact on him, too. He became ‘a little bit labour’, as he had become ‘a little bit liberal’ through his other activities. In the intensity of this learning process he was, therefore, not fully in control but also subject to having his own mindset challenged and changed.

Up until the age of 22, Samuel was a committed communist activist devoted to the party and convinced that his future lay in service to the cause. In 1956, the year of his graduation from Oxford with a first-class degree, this all-encompassing world was shattered. It received its first major blow following Nikita Khrushchev’s revelations about the

71 Samuel later commented that these were ‘extremely intense male friendships’ sharing similarities with ‘heterosexual relationships and jealousies’. Harrison, ‘Interview with Raphael Samuel’, 20 October 1987.

72 Harrison, ‘Interview with Raphael Samuel’, 18 September 1987.

73 Harrison, ‘Interview with Raphael Samuel’, 20 October 1987.

brutalities of Stalinism in the spring of that year. It was brought under further pressure by the refusal of the CPGB to permit open discussion amongst the membership or countenance internal reform amongst its own managerial infrastructure. The final straw came in the wake of the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian uprising in November and the CPGB's continued lack of decisive response. Shortly after this, Samuel, along with many other prominent members, left the party. Yet, although detached from the party, and increasingly disillusioned with the idea of political leadership, he did not abandon the sort of political work or values that had characterised his youth, rather he now turned to them all the more fulsomely. Looking back at that time, he explained: 'I really was an organizer and believed in organization and believed really in discipline, I suppose, and it was a belief in unity and above all ... I ... believed in being positive.'⁷⁴ Within a fortnight of leaving the party, he became the prime moving force behind the journal *Universities and Left Review*, part of a fledgling New Left movement, and subsequently an organising force for the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the New Left club network and the inspired but ill-fated Partisan cafe. In this sense, as Hobsbawm, his former party comrade, would fondly recall, Samuel truly was an 'ingrained activist'.⁷⁵

Samuel's youth provided an important crucible for both his intellectual interests and practices. As a young communist activist, growing up against the backdrop provided by the switch to popular front communism, his political work was practical and people-centred rather than primarily theoretical in nature. It aimed at engaging with and involving a range of people from both inside but also from outside of the party membership in political activity. For this, it was necessary to draw on a capacity to empathise and to consciously make use of his persona as a political tool. Outside of the formal CPGB policy position, this was further reinforced by the complexities provided by his wider social-cultural positioning, a Jewish family in English society, an only child surrounded by adults. He had always to work hard in order to gain a hearing; aware and sensitive to cultural differences, he could take nothing for granted. His aspiration to the specific party role of the organiser further reinforced this, developing in him ever more sophisticated analytical and communicative abilities. Whilst the roles of activist and organiser were, in the first place, embedded

74 Ibid.

75 Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, 212.

within the explicit context of the party and attached to a specific political agenda, they nevertheless imprinted upon him an important set of deep-rooted intellectual values and skills based around a capacity to both understand people outside of his own immediate sociocultural group and, as a result of this deeply personalised approach, to effectively engage with, even challenge, their existing ideas and, in the process, his own.

Recognising this distinctive form of applied intelligence not only restores to Samuel a greater sense of his complexity as an individual thinker, it also provides a valuable insight into the kind of person-centred, direct-action politics that he, through the Workshop, came to most exemplify. This suggests the need to reconsider the significance of the Workshop's political, pedagogical and historiographical agenda. The deeply contextualised and personalised nature of this form of intelligence also demonstrates the importance of applying a biographical approach to this sort of thinker. The great power of the organiser, particularly a communist one at the height of the Cold War, was the ability to work subtle transformations 'unseen and unheard'. It is only through close examination of the individual, situated within their network of relationships and acting in response to specific contexts, that its effects and implications can, even partially, be discerned.

The significance of engaging with different forms of intellectual skill and work lies not only in gaining a better understanding of individual figures such as Samuel but has significant implications for intellectual history more generally. Thinking is a fundamentally social activity that goes beyond the reading of particular text and occurs across a whole cross-section of communicative practices, many of which occur through direct person-to-person interactions. The potent transformative power of the personal relationship may leave little trace on the documentary record but, as Rowbotham suggested (quoted above), it can also linger longer in oral memory having, in the end, a deeper and more enduring effect on the individual or individuals who encounter it.

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