

[0:00:00]

Kieran Connell: So what brought you to the Centre, in the first instance?

Colin Sparks: Well, I was in Oxford doing the first bit of a PhD there which was called a Prob.B.Lit., and my supervisor was a guy called Terry Wooten, so I have been educated by some of the most famous people in intellectual life! They were pearls before swine! And I was very, very unhappy, in Oxford, I hate the place.

Kieran Connell: Why? Was it for political reasons?

Colin Sparks: No, no, politically it was very, very lively. Very large Left, I managed to get arrested outside the Army recruiting office, leading a demonstration after Bloody Sunday! Terry Wooten paid my fine! £3 for threatening behaviour! Threatening behaviour which --- anyway it is a long, silly story, not at all relevant. And I was very unhappy, I had very little intellectually in common with Terry either, because essentially my philosophical formation, my political formation, I was much closer to Terry because at that time, he was a member of IS. But intellectually, he was again heavily influenced by French structuralism, whereas my philosophical orientation came from a reading of Lukacs' *History and Class Consciousness*, which had just been published at the time. Well, two or three years earlier actually. And that was very unfashionable, very, very unfashionable interpretation of Marxism, the famous essay begins with the statement about capitalism is expressive totality. And expressive totality are exactly what Althusser didn't (overspeaking 0:01:49). So I was very unhappy talking to him and he said to me well look why don't you go to meet these people in Birmingham? And so I thought anywhere has got to be better than Oxford! Career mistake number one! At least in the short-term career mistake. And so I was actually a delegate in the National Union of Students conference, from St Cath's, and that was in Birmingham that year, so in-between drunken late night parties, forging Communist Party leaflets and generally screaming and shouting, as the Left did in those days, I went for an interview in Birmingham, at the Centre, which was then on the top floor of the Arts Building, as I am sure you know, and amazingly enough, compared with anywhere else I have been, the people who interviewed me were not only Stuart but also some of the students!

Kieran Connell: Can you remember who they were?

Colin Sparks: I think Paul Willis was a member, was one.

Kieran Connell: John? John Clarke?

Colin Sparks: John Clarke, possibly John Clarke. There was another guy, whose name escapes, but he was quite important at the time.

Kieran Connell: Jefferson?

Colin Sparks: Oh there you go! Tony Jefferson, wasn't it? And I think Rachel was it?

Kieran Connell: Rachel Powell?

Colin Sparks: Yes, Rachel Powell, yes. And they let me in, amazingly! Because I babbled, and sort of had a hysterical way about Marxism!

Kieran Connell: What was the impression? Given that ... having students on the admissions panel?

Colin Sparks: It was astonishing, and something that you wouldn't find today. And that was an **index?** of the lived democratic ethos of the place, and I don't know, have you spoken to the woman who was the administrator?

Kieran Connell: There are quite a few. Is it Joan? Joan Goode?

[0:03:45]

Colin Sparks: Joan, yes.

Kieran Connell: I am not sure if she is still around, because she was quite a bit older. She has been on my list of people to try and ---

Colin Sparks: Because it would be very, very interesting to see what she made of it all.

Kieran Connell: Well, she, funnily enough, in Richard's archive I think, she wrote a position paper, they got her to write a position paper, about what it felt like. And the frustrations of working with all these committed Marxists and then committed Feminists as well.

Colin Sparks: - being the one step lower.

Kieran Connell: Exactly, yes, which is going to be very interesting but I haven't tracked her down.

Colin Sparks: So it was quite a remarkable experience, so I mean I came because I hated Oxford and I hated the sort of the intellectual Conservatism. I don't know whether politically these people were Conservatives, but I remember being ... you know, you have to do a viva. At the end, you do an examination, and you write a paper by the end of your first year, when you are doing, well it is called a Prob B.Phil, Probationary B Lit, and I wrote the paper and had to go for a viva, and most examinations at Oxford you have to dress up in what is called 'subfusc', with black shoes, dark suit, white shirt and so on, and I had to borrow these things, and walked very uncomfortably into this viva with the gown and everything, and there were these guys just sitting around, quite casually dressed and oh Mr Sparks, you appear to have over-dressed! Which I had. Anyway, there was a guy called Jim Stewart who was quite a well known figure, I think he was at one of the Oxford things, Jim Stewart, and he asked me in the interview, at the end of the viva, he said 'Well Mr Sparks, a jolly interesting paper, we think if you just sort of abandon all this Marxism and theory and stuff, and just talk about the text, you will write a very good PhD!'

Kieran Connell: Which, for you, was precisely not what you wanted to hear?

Colin Sparks: Yes, exactly. And Birmingham did offer a theoretical framework. When I got there, I realised the theoretical framework was not quite what I expected!

Kieran Connell: I was going to say, how would you kind of describe first arriving there? What was the atmosphere like, and how did that kind of match or tally with your kind of intellectual baggage that you have just talked about?

Colin Sparks: Well, that is much more difficult to answer. The funny stories about why I hated Oxford are easily the sort of more honest accounting of what was my impression of Birmingham. I guess I probably got there, it would have been late 71 I think, I got there at the point at which Stuart was just putting together the first version, the very Barthesian version of *Encoding/Decoding* so I mean I think my memory is I walked into this discussion about Semiology, Semiotics, I can't remember which particular interpretation they used, with which I was relatively unfamiliar. I had known a guy, when I was an undergraduate, called Dave Lang, who had introduced me to a bit of that, but I mean it was a different world to me, and I struggled to cope with that, and I struggled to cope with Althusser. I mean this is a bit before Polansis, Polansis is two or three years later I think in terms of his influence, particularly influential on Ian actually. And I really found it interesting and exciting and stimulating, but I wasn't of it. And I guess what I was really doing at the time was sort of running around Birmingham talking to Engineers and so on. That must have been afterwards, it must have been afterwards, because I got there after Saltley which was in 72, so maybe late 72. And there was plenty to do in the 'working class' movement.

Kieran Connell: For you then, was your intellectual interests and then your political interests ---

Colin Sparks: They were fairly closely fused. Fairly closely fused, yes. Which is why the philosophical interest in Lukacs, because of the whole stuff about the immediacy of practise and so forth, and I think the

Centre ... my view is there was in the late 60s, long before I got there, an encounter with French structuralism, which predated the encounter with Marxism as it were, so Althusser was the natural and obvious road, and I think the attraction of Althusser in particular, which I struggled with, was that he effectively disarticulated the internal organisation of texts, from any material determination. The last instance, the lonely arrow of the last instance never strikes, and I mean Stuart always used to refer to people who thought otherwise, like me, as being low flying materialists, which is that stock phrase. Yes I was a low flying materialist, and I still am!

[0:09:36]

Kieran Connell: Like a badge of honour!

Colin Sparks: Yes, well I mean I don't need to justify it.

Kieran Connell: But once you ... for you personally though, your intellectual and political were quite close together. Was that something that was reflected more broadly in the Centre, do you think?

Colin Sparks: Well I mean a number of people not I think under my influence, maybe they were, came to join the organisation, Chris Pawlin for example. Ivan Miller. John Ellis asked me if he could join, I said no!

Kieran Connell: So what was your precise role at that point in IS?

Colin Sparks: I was the district secretary.

Kieran Connell: The district secretary?

Colin Sparks: Which didn't mean very much. I mean I suppose they only had a couple of hundred members, quite a strong implantation in the AUEW, which was, at that time, Birmingham AUEW, well they were the people who brought the Engineers out, our people weren't, but they were part of the group of actually predominantly Communist Party Engineers, who had brought the Engineers out to Saltley Gates, and had led to the defeat of the ... the victory of the first miner's strike, defeating the Government. So there was quite a lively working class political culture there. I think less, probably less self consciously politically sophisticated, is the one that Ian for example would talk about. He had grown up in Glasgow. But nevertheless, you could sense that you could sit in pubs and you could hear people talking about unions and shop stewards and I remember, what is it, tractors and transmissions I think somewhere in north Birmingham, I can't remember exactly where, selling 70 copies of *Socialist Worker* in half an hour. An experience that I had never had before, or since! The last time I sold it was about 1992 and I doubt if I sold 70 in the whole year!

Kieran Connell: Right.

Colin Sparks: So there was a feeling on my part that there was a more important world of working class politics, and the Centre was very much what I did for a living. So I felt really rather distant from the life at the Centre, didn't form very many close friendships there, I think. And the intellectual impact of the place was something that I only really understood, the impact it had on me, I only understood years later. I don't know, and it is still ... I mean I suppose what it did and it is hard to say how and when it did this, but I mean I come, I guess, because of the Lukács, and also the literary background, with very much a Matthew Arnold's view of culture! And the centre blew that out of the water! Not directly, through encountering Althusser or Barthes, or anything like that, but the general atmosphere of taking seriously cultural forms, which were ...

Kieran Connell: Otherwise dismissed?

Colin Sparks: Yes, otherwise dismissed. Football hooligans is the great example of that. And I find myself still doing that, I have just written a piece for the European Science Foundation, on the digital divide. Where there is all this stuff about how non-users, are in some sense, the Government, the British Government says target, they need to be targeted. You can imagine with drones! That in some sense or other they are a problem that has to be solved, rather than the human phenomenon that

has to be understood, and I think that is still a live issue, and that is something I think that I got from Birmingham.

[0:13:48]

Kieran Connell: Going back to your kind of role in the IS, and obviously there were a lot of different political groups active, that people would tend to affiliate to. Was Big Flame around when you were there?

Colin Sparks: Not really, not I don't think in the Centre, it may have been but I can't remember actually encountering it.

Kieran Connell: But what was the relationship between the IS and the different, the other forms of politics at the Centre? Were people asking you to join, like you have mentioned some people wanted to join? Were others kind of more suspicious? How was it?

Colin Sparks: I think there was no sectarianism at all that I can recall. There were clearly plenty of sectarians in the movement. Fortunately there is no-one from the WRP there, so there weren't lengthy denunciations of Stalinism and blood, but it was ... you know, I think there was a general ... I can't remember any deep political rifts. The feminist rift came after my time, I don't know but I think the organised Euro-Communism came after my time as well. I mean I don't know much about the dynamics of that, so you know I didn't feel that people were hostile to me because I was a Trot.

Kieran Connell: If there was any hostility, hostility maybe is too strong, but you talked about marginality ---

Colin Sparks: Well, it is self-imposed marginality. And because I was writing on literature, and although there was a literature group, it was rather small and not one of the fashionable ones! And the area that I remember as being most fashionable was the sub-cultures group, which was the strongest I think.

Kieran Connell: I mean, that is one of the things I was going to ask you about, was the kind of working practises, your reflections on the working practises. I mean you mentioned the literature group and the sub groups more generally. I mean what was the process of collective work?

Colin Sparks: It was the Monday seminar, it was Monday morning, wasn't it?

Kieran Connell: What was your experience of that?

Colin Sparks: It was pretty dazzling! Particularly since it was invariably dominated by Stuart, who, whatever criticism you have of Stuart, he is a staggering intellect. I have lots of criticisms of Stuart, but his intellectual capabilities were an art. They are probably beginning to fade, I imagine, but were pretty overwhelming, and the rhetorical force of the man, so I mean I remember my favourite story about this. My favourite story. I don't know whether this reflects well on me, or badly on me. But a couple of years after I took him out with a women who is now my wife actually, she was my girlfriend, this is 1975-1976 or so, shows how long I've been around (laughs), to hear Stuart Hall speak. And I'd been talking about him a lot, and she came along, and he spoke and she turned to me afterwards and said 'You never told me he was black'. And whether it was a good thing that that hadn't seemed to be at all important, the colour of his skin, or whether it was my or his or whatever, whether it was to do with the blindness in the politics, that my perception of Stuart was never at that stage determined by the colour of his skin.

Kieran Connell: He has spoken himself, hasn't he, about how he himself only realising that he was black, quite late on, when it became ---

Colin Sparks: When it became a political issue? Yes I mean I used to tell my mother my supervisor was Stuart Hall, and she used to go 'what do you do?' Well I am doing a PhD. 'Oh that nice man on the telly?' (laughs)

Kieran Connell: Who we have since found out is not a very nice man! Because obviously the Centre had this commitment to having students on ...

Colin Sparks: Everything, yes.

Kieran Connell: Breaking down the kind of formal barriers between staff and students on the one hand. Then it seems that Stuart was also quite a pervasive influence on the other hand.

[0:18:11]

Colin Sparks: But how could he be otherwise? He was intellectually head and shoulders above any of the other people. I mean there were a lot of talented people in Birmingham at the time, and I guess some of them are just as famous as Stuart. The novelist, I can't remember his name.

Kieran Connell: Lodge.

Colin Sparks: Stuart Lodge. David Lodge. And David Lodge and some other people, Dorothy Thompson, I believe. And maybe there was a level of the University where these people, these great minds, operated, but ...

Kieran Connell: What about the student relationships with ... I mean the staff members would have been when you were there, Michael Green? Because I think Richard Johnson came slightly later?

Colin Sparks: He came towards the end of when I was there. Well I think Michael's strengths were not ones that you immediately appreciated in seminars, I mean he is a clearly clever and sharp man, and I distinctly remember having an argument with him about the red badge of courage, which being a Lukacian, I persisted in reading as a realist text, and he of course said 'This is not about war. This is about something else.' Actually it was a Monday seminar actually, so there were literary questions that were discussed at the Monday seminars. But I mean Michael was no way as dominant a person as Stuart. In terms of ... I mean I would be very critical of Stuart as a supervisor, having done it myself now for 30 or 40 years, I think that he made a lot of mistakes as a supervisor. Which is why it took me 17 years and Andy Tolson 18 years to finish our PhD!

Kieran Connell: So was he quite hands off then?

Colin Sparks: Oh too much. When he put his hands on it would be encourage you to broaden. My basic philosophy about supervising a PhD is, yes exactly, this is an examination, it's a hoop you have got to jump through, it is not ... Kant's three critiques so ... I think he was very, very ... very stimulating to have an occasional meeting with your supervisor but it usually resulted in you thinking oh I had better go and read a few hundred more books or something! Rather than having a clear sense of how ... you can tell that that non-completion was characteristic. And fortunately you didn't need it in those days. Today you won't get an interview without a PhD and several publications in those days.

Kieran Connell: That is the irony I suppose, that the focus was more on the publications than it was on the actual completion of the PhD, and that was one of the things I was going to ask you about. I mean the time you were there was round about the time when the debates around working papers were in the journal.

Colin Sparks: Yes that was the thing, I honestly don't remember writing that! I have no memory of that debate!

Kieran Connell: Do you have any recollection? I mean what is interesting is was there a sort of sense, can you remember, because now of course, it is almost a fetisation of publications, REF and all that stuff, then REF wasn't around. So what was the motivation for these kind of publications? Was there any sense of an academic career amongst you and your peers do you remember? Or was it more to do with political or other reasons?

Colin Sparks: It is hard to say, and I can't speak for other people. I mean one of the reasons why I think I probably participated in debate was because if you're out of the organised left, then publication is written on your forehead, not necessarily academic publication, but you have read what is to be done, you know the importance of papers and organisers blah blah blah blah. So it seemed to be natural to have an organised expression, I guess. I suppose what I found absent on the Left then, at least

my bit of the Left, a tiny little bit, was any outlet for theoretical work of a general cultural kind, which is I think why I wrote that particular paper and why I was active and remembering I wanted to see somewhere where I could publish. I mean Michael Green asked me 'What career plans do you have?' And I said well I said, and I don't think I used this phrase, it was a phrase I borrowed from Bukharin, 'Either in power or in prison'. But I think going to Birmingham, for most people, at that stage, I mean later it turned into a golden wand, but at that stage, career disaster! First of all, no university would touch you, the polytechnics being pretty desperate, sucked up most people, so I came to a polytechnic in central London largely on the fact that Stuart happened to know Nick Garnam, who was the then head, for a long time the head. But not to teach English, to teach Media Studies, of which I knew absolutely nothing! I read *Scoop!* And today I don't know much more! I have managed to get away with it for 40 years! And I think that is probably the experience of most people, they certainly didn't go into even a mid range university, I don't think. I am just trying to think, did anyone go straight into a university post?

[0:24:17]

Kieran Connell: Thinking off the top of my head ---

Colin Sparks: It was mostly into the polys, wasn't it?

Kieran Connell: Polytechnics, yes.

Colin Sparks: After a bit of a struggle. And even someone who ... actually maybe John Ellis did, I don't know.

Kieran Connell: But a lot of people taught not even in polytechnics, they were in colleges, adult education colleges. In Wolverhampton, they did a lot of teaching in like South Birmingham College for example. So even the polytechnics were obviously ---

Colin Sparks: A bit posh!

Kieran Connell: But I mean what about the Centre, and external relationships? Did you have any ... for example, were you aware of the tension between the University as a whole and the Centre, whilst you were there?

Colin Sparks: It didn't raise itself very sharply. I mean the fact they refused Stuart a chair was widely commented on, with outrage! What kind of Vice Chancellor was that?! I mean and I guess the blockage for his career was the same as the difficulty the students had then getting hired, which I guess is commonplace of any group that is making a radical innovation in intellectual life. Particularly as it was Birmingham, where as you think about the previous ... the Levisite revolution in Literary Studies, that was centered very firmly in Cambridge, and the centre of an elite education, whereas Birmingham in those days was ... I mean they didn't have the Russell group in those days, I don't think there was, there is Oxford and Cambridge and there is the Russell group, and there is the rest. And I think in those days, there was Oxford and Cambridge and ---

Kieran Connell: And then the rest?

Colin Sparks: Well the red bricks, but there was a big gap! And so I think in terms of ... in terms of Stuart's career, that was the only point at which the tension became obvious, and I don't remember. The English department had quite a good ... because it came out of the English department, of course and had David Lodge, it had... Hoggart, it had a number of people, and the only other tension I can remember was the tension with Leicester! Who were regarded as being sociologists! And I think they were rather contemptuous of us and I think Peter Golding still is! He is pretty contemptuous of everybody, I think! So what do you want to know?

Kieran Connell: Finally, I was going to ask, a couple of questions to end with really, firstly were you actively trying, were you frustrated about the Centre's emphasis on intellectual work and not as much on a wider politics in Birmingham?

Colin Sparks: No, I think that obviously ... I wouldn't say frustrated. I guess I mean I suppose there are several levels to this, one is a level of personal failure which is always having had the foot in two camps, well not always, not covertly, for 20 years, having had a foot in the camp of pursuing an academic career, and a foot in the political camp, with different balances between the two. I suppose in the end, the academic camp won! But the split inside me which was reflected in the two different committees, which I was relating to. Then I think there was a sense that, at least I had, and I think a generation of young people had, a real sense that everything was up for grabs, and that there wasn't 40 years of teaching, paying off the mortgage stretching before you! And so I think they were, yes they, were less academically focused than certainly the young American academics. I suppose one big difference between me and them was that I think they thought there was ... the struggle inside the institutions was more important than I did. And I suppose I never really believed that you can change society through a seminar room.

[0:29:40]

Kieran Connell: Whereas others may have believed the struggle within the seminar room, or within the institution ---

Colin Sparks: Yes I think that ... and that fits theoretical practise, all of the Althusserian philosophical position leads quite naturally to that. Because it is ...

Kieran Connell: That leads me onto my final kind of question really which is very broad, and by all means no way of answering it if it is not possible. But I was thinking what do you think are kind of the historical structures then that made that the kind of practise that was being developed at the Centre whilst you were there? If possible, you have talked about '68. And you talked about your generation who had that kind of politics of the possible, for want of a better phrase.

Colin Sparks: Yes it was a radically democratic policy. And given the emphasis on the politics from below, stress, it is actually very surprising, looking back on it, that Feminism took so long to come to the Centre. And it very surprising that ethnicity took so long to enter into the Centre, because I don't think that those strands were, the Civil Rights movement in America, early phase of the women's movement, long predate their entry into the Centre, and it is a bit of a mystery why it took so long, to be honest. So ... it ... I think that there is the short-term conjunction of the crisis of '68 and its reflection in Britain. There was a more general problem with the ... and you can trace this back to say Paul and Wallem's book on the popular arts, or Raymond Williams, all those provided much of the theoretical justification never actually wrote much about pop culture, well he did it was on television but his main work is on drama, and blah blah blah blah blah, blah. I think there was an increasing sense amongst radical intellectuals, I suppose you would call them, that we had to have something to say about the vast majority of culture and it was no good to do a Queenie Leavis and sort of say (overspeaking 0:32:16) and there was that screaming need, that in a democratic society, you have to have something to say.

Kieran Connell: About mass culture.

Colin Sparks: And I think that ... there was something else I was just thinking of, just then. It has gone! A function of old age! So I think that there were a number of factors.

Kieran Connell: So things that just collided in that moment?

Colin Sparks: Yes. And that it was, I mean obviously personalities were important, that I don't think there is much to add to the fact that Williams and Thompson were important, Hoggart in another way was, I think that his role, apart from the organisational fact that he set up the bloody place (laughs), his intellectual influence I think ...

Kieran Connell: It kind of moved quite a long way from where ... the regional project that he set up, it moved considerably didn't it, by the time he had left?

Colin Sparks: Yes it did, but looking back on it ... I mean compared with Thompson for example, Thompson's account of culture is highly politicised, and it is recognisably the Communist Party! Hoggart's account of culture is highly depoliticised, he refers in the introduction to ... literacy, something about

yes there were Marxist in the working class movement, but they are not really very interesting. It is partly because he grew up in Leeds, which had never been one of the absolute strongest ... if he had been born in Sheffield, maybe! But I think you ask whose version of culture came to dominate Cultural Studies. It is a depoliticised Hoggartian version, and I mean depoliticised in the narrowest sense. The depoliticised Hoggartian version, rather than the more classically Marxist Thompsonian version, so I wouldn't ... I mean I wouldn't dismiss the Hoggart contribution intellectually, not at the level of ideas or what he was trying to do, but at the level of ... the paradigm, yes I suppose I grew up in the '60s, I read Thomas Coombes (laughs), the paradigm of what constituted normal Cultural Studies I think is much more indebted to Hoggart than to Thompson. Williams, well Williams is the great ... the great, what is the word, the person who ... tries. There is a word for it, but sort of faces in all directions at once.

[0:35:28]

Kieran Connell: Okay, kind of like an enigmatic kind of ...

Colin Sparks: Enigma isn't the right word. That his language, and I probably think you are too young to remember, Neil Kinnock, could never speak a complete sentence, because you could hear inside his head there were two voices! And I think that actually is Williams' linguistic problems! At least two voices I guess.

Kieran Connell: Well thanks very much!

Colin Sparks: Is it okay?

Kieran Connell: That was really great.

[End of Transcript]