

[0:00:00]

Kieran Connell: What I was going to ask you first really was about whether you had any recollections of, what your perception was of these debates generally in this period in the 1970s. I know you started on New Society in, what, 77 or late 76?

Martin Kettle: Something like that.

Kieran Connell: But did you have a more general perception of what the debates were?

Martin Kettle: Well I knew History Workshop because I'd been at Oxford and I knew Raphael Samuel, when I was an undergraduate. I can't remember whether I was there for the very first History Workshop, I have a feeling I may have been, and I was certainly there for some of the early ones before this one and I knew quite a lot of the people who were in on the ground, like Alan Howkins and Dave Douglas (?) and Sally Alexander and people like that. I was familiar with them in the era of Ruskin and the History Workshop in its early days.

Kieran Connell: Did it affect your political - was it an impact on your politics or your intellectual interests?

Martin Kettle: It was a reflection of my politics rather than anything else. I did history as an undergraduate at Baliol College between 1968 and 71 and I came from a Communist background myself. My father was a Communist and so I knew what Marxism was when I was 7 (laughter), at some level. I knew about the Communist Party when I was at Junior School, so I was unusual. That's where I come from, it's in my DNA. So History Workshop wasn't something that I, kind of, discovered in that sense, it was a reflection of what I was interested in. I've been trying to remember this - I think I wanted to go to this particular History Workshop because - I think I suggested it, although Raphael had connections with New Society. He wrote in New Society from time to time and he would have known some of the other people who edited New Society. I think that I knew it was going to be quite a pivotal occasion and that therefore it would be quite a good thing to report on.

Kieran Connell: Obviously, it was an academic conference, so nowadays, the thought of a mainstream magazine reporting on an academic conference is probably quite (inaudible 0:03:04).

Martin Kettle: Yeah, except that history - well, I may be wrong about this, but at that period, what you can loosely call Socialist history, had a considerable following and history is always quite an easy thing to write about. Look at how - I don't mean easy as in fun (?). It's easy to sell a story, easy to pitch it. Look at the preponderance of stories about the history curriculum in the Gove reforms. It's an easier handle for the general reader than talking about how you cover chemistry.

Kieran Connell: So these debates that were taking place -

Martin Kettle: So these debates have a wider resonance for the kind of readership that we had on New Society, which was quite academic, quite leftish, not dogmatically, and public sector. So, I suppose, of its time, particularly the involvement of Edward in it.

Kieran Connell: Thompson?

Martin Kettle: Yes, because he was a huge star. That gave it extra appeal, I would say. To me, Edward was the central figure of that weekend, by a mile.

Kieran Connell: Generally, what are your memories of that weekend in Ruskin - the atmosphere over the course of the couple of days?

Martin Kettle: I must have been to more sessions than just the big one when they had this big debate and I must have floated around and talked to Raphael once or twice, but this was the central thing. It was on an evening and it was cold and it was in a hall which was highly dramatic because it was an old church

and it had a very big noisy heater, blow heater, huge thing that would heat a stadium. So people were very wrapped up in lots of heavy outer clothes and everything like that, so it was all quite dramatic. It felt a bit like something out of, I don't know, Dr Zhivago or something like that. I wasn't particularly hot in the academic debates and I knew about Altizer. I had read, with difficulty, some Altizer and I can't now remember - you would know, because you're studying it - but whether Edward had already written ...

[0:06:24]

Kieran Connell: I think so (overspeaking).

Martin Kettle: I think he probably had written ... Whether it was an article ...

Kieran Connell: (Inaudible 0:06:31) theory.

Martin Kettle: Whether it was a book that was out or whether he'd written articles which went into making that book, I think it was very much centred around him, as I recall it, and he appeared at History Workshops periodically. He was a feature of the History Workshops. It wasn't unprecedented for someone of his fame and eminence, and he had a unique fame and eminence because of 'The Making of the English Working Class', which was in a sense the bible of the History Workshop, in a way. I don't think he spoke first, but perhaps you would know.

Kieran Connell: I think he may have spoke last actually.

Martin Kettle: Yes, I think he might.

Kieran Connell: (Inaudible 0:07:41)

Martin Kettle: Yeah, I think that's right. He was such a brilliant performer, he was an exceptional performer. At this distance of time, I can't remember the things that he said, other than the things I wrote down in the article that he said.

Kieran Connell: Did you have an impression of who came out on top (inaudible 0:08:12).

Martin Kettle: I was very sympathetic to him. I would still be - I still am. I am not involved in these debates, I am not an academic, but it seems to me that, if you like, the capture of, which was how he used to talk about it, the capture of Marxist history and left-wing history by theoreticians rather than bottom-up (?) archivists and so on. It was a terrible thing. I think it captured, and may has still captured, I don't know, you'd have to tell me, Marxist historiography. What I thought then, and it's hard to differentiate from what I thought then, to what I think now - it just seemed to me that there was, at some point in the late twentieth century, the professional, academic Marxists invented and refined and developed a way of talking about history which excluded everyone other than themselves, so that it became an introspective, introverted set of arguments. Not unimportant, but the argument of a priesthood rather than the argument of the laity and it seemed to me that that was - I don't pretend to any importance in this, I have none whatsoever. Edward spoke for me, it seemed to me, and I remember feeling that he gave me confidence to have a view about these things because I'm of the generation which rather revered New Left Review and was impressionable about currents in mid twentieth century Marxism and was dissatisfied with the sclerotic Communist tradition, Soviet tradition, so was open to new thinking, but felt intimidated by it. To be honest, I've barely read New Left Review for the last 30 or 40 years. Not because I'm not, at some level, quite interested, but it always seemed to me that, at that period, it just became so preoccupied with a theoretical preoccupation, that it was really quite difficult.

Kieran Connell: Getting back to the debate, how important was the difference in style between speakers, in terms of Stuart Hall, Richard Johnson and Edward Thompson. Was there a different way of approaching (overspeaking).

Martin Kettle: Edward made people laugh and people applauded what he said as he went along sometimes, as I recall it. But, as I wrote in the article, this came on top of an already developing and quite deep

sense of resentment by the Ruskin students that their event had somehow been taken away from them by people who only spoke in theory, rather than talked about wages and hours and conditions and work and gender, because - I think I'm right in saying, you may know - but actually the first women's liberation conference, I think, was at Ruskin in about 68. It had some kind of connection with History Workshop -

[0:12:41]

Kieran Connell: I think it's always (overspeaking).

Martin Kettle: Vestigious, vestigially, and that may have been to do with Anna Davin and Sheila Rowbottom, knowing and being part of the late 50s undergraduates, of which Raphael was such a charismatic part. And I think that, in a way, whilst Raphael himself was well able to take part in debates of high theory, I think he felt quite uncomfortable about this tension between the proletariat who wanted to talk about mining and work and trade unionism and this post-Robbins revolution academic Marxist tradition which was, I think, very much associated with whatever they were called, the School of, was it called the School of -

Kieran Connell: (Inaudible 0:13:58) studies

Martin Kettle: Yeah (inaudible 0:14:00) studies, in Birmingham. And Stuart Hall. Stuart Hall struck me then, as he would still strike me now, if I -

Kieran Connell: (Inaudible 0:14:09) academic.

Martin Kettle: - as somebody who bridged those 2 things quite ably and again, he was very charismatic. I have always, to this day, found Stuart quite difficult to understand, in a way that was not true of Edward or the Communist Party generation that Edward and my father and Christopher Hill and even Eric Hobsbawm and many others I knew as a young person, were part of. I think one of the things that their generation put a premium on was being able to express Marxism in a clear and un-dogmatic way to working class people, to Labour. I think they were quite good at that, you know. If you look at Christopher Hill's writings in the 40s and 50s or Edward's, they are -

Kieran Connell: Accessible.

Martin Kettle: Very accessible and in my view, very well written. I think that is actually an absolute and I think it shows in journalism. I think it's incredibly important to be clear, so that people who don't know about what you're writing about, learn something from it. I know this is the stuff of 50 years of debate in Birmingham and other places, but I think clarity in the use of language and accessibility are (overspeaking).

Kieran Connell: Is Johnson's presentation slightly more (inaudible 0:15:53) (overspeaking).

Martin Kettle: I remember it as being more impenetrable.

Kieran Connell: He was reading, wasn't he, from script, whereas the other 2, I believe, were (overspeaking).

Martin Kettle: Is that what I say then?

Kieran Connell: (Overspeaking) from other people as well (laughter).

Martin Kettle: I don't remember. I didn't know of him. He was not somebody I was aware of beforehand, but I think Raphael was probably the person who was the most keen I should come and write about it and do a feature in New Society. I'm pretty sure that was the case. I think, as I said in the piece, Raphael was almost neuralgically(?) opposed to the cult of the personality and although he was a highly charismatic force - you never came across him, did you?

Kieran Connell: No, I never (inaudible 0:16:51).

[0:16:52]

Martin Kettle: I can't remember when he died, in the 90s probably. Well, you were too young. He was a very charismatic and unusual person, an incredible person.

Kieran Connell: Did you meet him?

Martin Kettle: An unrepeatabe figure. Do you know Bill Schwarz?

Kieran Connell: Yes. I'm interviewing Bill Schwarz (overspeaking).

Martin Kettle: Because he would know quite a lot of - I don't know if he was there.

Kieran Connell: He was at Birmingham with Stuart and Richard.

Martin Kettle: Yes. I don't know if he was at the Oxford thing, but he became very involved with History Workshop and with Raphael

Kieran Connell: I think he was quite an important bridge actually between the 2 schools, in a sense. Just more generally, just finally, I don't want to keep you too long, but do you have a sense of - because obviously, that debate took place in 79, and Thatcher was elected in 79 - looking back at that, do you see that and what has gone on subsequently, politically and socially in Britain, do you have a sense that 79 being quite an important time (inaudible 0:18:03). Do you relate the election of Thatcher and this debate - do they stand out to you as being turning points or was it about something that looking back on it, was a bit more slightly academic?

Martin Kettle: I would find it difficult to connect the 2 things in my own mind. I mean, clearly, 1979 politically was an important time because that was the beginning of Thatcher. I suppose I think that that debate was part of the disintegration and slow death of Labourism and one manifestation of that - I don't want to get into using pseudo-academic words, but that appropriation of Labour history, I feel (inaudible 0:19:16), if that's what then happened. It would seem to me to be part of that and I think you could certainly link that to the crisis in the Labour movement, which of course is already well under way before 1979, and the more I look back on it, the more it seems to me that the critical moments were the failure of the unions to rethink what their role might be in the context of the Bullock Report. It is a forgotten event now, but in retrospect, has always seemed to me incredibly significant, the dismissal of the Bullock Report, and I think that that sort of workerism that was quite a feature of the History Workshop has gone now, really. Also, that working class experience that underpinned Ruskin at that period has probably changed a lot. I haven't been to Ruskin for yonks and I don't know what it's like there now. I have a feeling it's even moved, hasn't it? I don't think it's where it was in Walton Street. That has been a big change. Is David Selbourne still around?

Kieran Connell: I don't know the name.

Martin Kettle: Well, he was a very troubled politics tutor at Ruskin, a contemporary of Raphael's. He became very hostile to, what he would loosely call, the hard left and he started writing books about communitarianism and freedom of the individual and all that sort of thing. I don't know what's happened to him, he went to live in Italy at some point in the 1980s. He was a really interesting, troubled figure. They tried to sack him at Ruskin and it became an issue because, my memory is, that quite a lot of the students disapproved of his critiques of the Labour movement.

Kieran Connell: OK. I'll have to look into (overspeaking).

Martin Kettle: So he was part of that fracturing of that classic Ruskin College, Labour movement.

Kieran Connell: The Labour movement, the trade unions, which began to fracture in this period, but also the intellectual (inaudible 0:22:33) that, in a sense, that debate that you went to and wrote about, was also an example of that fracturing too, because it was empirical history versus theoretical (inaudible

0:22:42) theory. So, in a sense, that whole - that's where the link now would be, I guess, with the fracturing intellectually but also fracturing in terms of the Labour movement.

[0:22:52]

Martin Kettle: Yes. I mean, it has certainly never recovered and it never will recover, in my opinion. Whatever form popular institutions and organisations take, it's not going to be in the form of the nineteenth and early twentieth century union movement because that whole nature of work has changed, never to be replaced. Unfortunately, there are too many people who think that it can somehow be recreated and I view that as a tragedy, rather than as something wicked. I think it's very sad that the unions are as unimportant in British society as they are but to be important, they have to have a rethink of what they're there to do, and that's why I think that workplace democracy and so on, is the way back (inaudible 0:24:01). It could still, even now, be very relevant, especially post the crash.

Kieran Connell: Well, thanks very much for your time. I know there's more pressing issues to ...

[Break in Recording]

[0:00:00]

Kieran Connell: Sorry, talking averages (?)

Martin Kettle: I should say Edward was somebody I knew as a 3-year old. (Laughter). This was before he left the Communist Party, in the West Riding - I was brought up in Leeds, the Thompsons lived in Halifax and the families were very close. They then broke apart over Hungary but Edward and Dorothy were both very friendly to me throughout their lives and it was a great privilege to know both of them in their different ways. What I'm saying is that Edward always spoke in very long, complicated, lot of sub-clause sentences and as a tyro journalist who didn't have a decent enough shorthand, it was impossible to write it all down and I know that I didn't write it all down and I remember when I came to write my account of it, that the biggest disappointment to me, in my own practice, was that, as we would say, I wasn't able to recreate the theatrical and linguistic power of what he said. So, what I wrote in my article has lots of little phrases, but very few sentences and it was the sentences that I actually remember as being heady and persuasive and -

Kieran Connell: Polemical?

Martin Kettle: Well, certainly polemical, but also kind of gloriously, you know, a performance. It was a performance art when he did his thing, Edward, and he was a wonderful polemicist but he also had an incredible literary and theatrical style, because of his whole background. He was just really good at it and I know I didn't capture that. It isn't about (inaudible 0:02:19).

[End of Transcript]