

Merilyn Moos, interviewed by Kieran Connell , 7 May 2013.

Interviewer: So what brought you to the Centre in the first instance?

Respondent: I'd been to Oxford but refused the Honorary MA because I think it's corrupt, you know, where you can buy an MA at Oxford, basically. F**k that.

Interviewer: So you did English at Oxford?

Respondent: No, I did PPE.

Interviewer: PPE, okay.

Respondent: I come from cultural studies from the political end. I never was into English. That's not true, I wasn't into it, but that wasn't where I came from. So, I wanted to go somewhere which combined politics with theory. I think had the cultural studies degree existed when I was taking my degree, if you like, that's where I would have gone. That, actually, I think really has been my home. Of course, it's a very particular home the way that Stuart [Hall] etc. did it, but that chimes with how I think: that combination of... I don't know. It combines within itself many different sorts of discourses as cultural studies which is, actually... So that's not a very good answer but that is why I went-

Interviewer: So did the Centre have a reputation then when you were at Oxford? Had you heard about it from other people or...?

Respondent: No. But I knew of Stuart Hall because of Left Review, He was a figure whom I looked up to even before I knew him.

Interviewer: What was your political or intellectual baggage then, your sense of viewpoint?

Respondent: I've had a bit of a strange trajectory. I went to Oxford in '62, so I had to have been quite bright because women – and I went to an ordinary grammar school, I didn't go to a public school... But I didn't have a very high opinion of myself for all sorts of reasons. I ended up as an FE lecturer. I wanted to get back into a more academic world. I had joined IS [International Socialism] ,

then I joined – then I moved onto SW [Socialist Worker], I wasn't thrown out! There were an awful lot of people who were much more theoretically refined than me in SW, and I took a bit of a marginal seat. But I became very, very involved in something called Rank and File, and I became the secretary of the union branch of NATFHE, the Union for Further and Higher Education, which is now called UCU [Union of College and University lecturers]. And I became the secretary of the Rank and File organisation within the union, and I wore an SW hat but I never had it jammed on very hard. Then SW basically wound up Rank and File and I could float off to do a little bit more of what I wanted to do. The college gave me a sabbatical which was very nice of them, so I could go and... yeah, I could go and have fun.

Interviewer: So you went to the Centre on your sabbatical, was that how it happened?

Respondent: Yeah. I got a place at the Centre and I got a sabbatical.

Interviewer: Can you remember who was on your interview panel? Would it have been Stuart?

Respondent: I don't think I was interviewed. I think I got straight in. I had a small reputation. I had written a lot of stuff some of which had been published even back then. Stuart probably knew about me.

Interviewer: What kind of stuff did you – is it pamphlets, political pamphlets or...?

Respondent: No, not pamphlets. I was involved in writing the Rank and File magazine so he would have probably known about that. I had articles being published in books, but nothing very big: on education really. My area was the same as when the Centre published, my occasional paper on government policy and 16+ education.

Interviewer: Can you remember what the atmosphere was like when you arrived? Did it meet up to your expectations?

Respondent: I felt I was on the outside. I was living with Eve Brooks, I don't know if her name has cropped up, who was a friend of a friend of mine, Sue Clegg. So I was commuting between London and Birmingham.

Interviewer: So you never moved to...

Respondent: I never moved to Birmingham. I had my own flat in London at the time. I stayed most weeks in Birmingham but I certainly wasn't there all of the time. It was different only being there on secondment because most people were there doing PhD's; in a sense theirs was a commitment to the Centre as a way of life. I was a very – I was a strange creature in that setting. You had other people there who lived near Birmingham and who were using it as a base and combining it with doing work, but there I was going backwards and forwards. And I came with this – I'm proud to say, I came with a view that one has to look at theory in terms of practice. Probably more then than now, but still now, I think one can't isolate theory from the social relations in society, and I think that the purpose of writing should be theoretically to inform struggle. And I arrived with this perspective, and I arrived with having run Rank and File which was an oppositional tendency within the union. I later almost got thrown out of the union, in fact for anti-racist struggle, you might have heard of it, the John Fernandez thing?

Interviewer: No.

Respondent: Okay, doesn't matter.

Interviewer: It sounds interesting.

Respondent: I'll tell you about it separately. That was after I had gone to Birmingham. But that was, I think... I was very immersed in how one struggles for reforms even in a piddling FE college, and I arrived with this perspective. ..

Interviewer: Did you find that perspective - that theory should always be in relation to practice and influencing practice – did you find that that was out of sync with the flavour at the Centre?

Respondent: Yes. But, I mean, it was out of sync in a very subtle fashion because what they argued, and it annoyed me and I wouldn't be able to argue as coherently now as I was able to argue then, because what they said - in fact I think I said this to you on the phone - they said theory in practise is praaxis and that, actually, what one is doing in theory is a form or practise. I said, basically, you are living in intellectual ivory towers and you have no idea what it's actually like even in an FE college. And I remember there was one argument, I can't remember what it was about unfortunately, but we were going to produce something for the public gaze, it might have been about Grunwicks because, as I said, there was a lot of heat around the issue of Grunwicks, so it

might have been about Grunwicks. I remember that they said, 'Oh, we'll produce a thousand word leaflet,' or whatever, and I was saying, 'No! No! No! That isn't what works!' And I remember saying things like, 'If I went into my staffroom in my FE college, these people weren't fools, and handed out a 1000 word leaflet nobody would read it.' It has to be something that people read in their lunch break while they are eating their sandwiches. And that was a perspective. I don't know what your parents would have to say about me saying this stuff, but that was a perspective which I alone was essentially arguing.

Interviewer: Did you find that it was quite inward looking then in terms of you talking about the ivory tower?

Respondent: It wasn't inward looking, no, it was not inward looking. There was a tremendous awareness of the struggles which are going on outside of itself, but it's ivory townerness was its emphasis – I'm being crude- almost one needs to refine the ideas in order to inform the correct practice. With me saying, 'Ahhhhh,' you've got to have an interaction between the practice and the ideas, the ideas can't be seen as something which you just work out in isolation. So that's what I meant.

Interviewer: Sure. Were there any allies with you who sided with you in that debate?

Respondent: I won on Grunwicks. I in the end, I think I shamed people. We ended up, you know, in those meetings which took place, in those wonderfully democratic meetings that took place-

Interviewer: The annual or the weekly ones?

Respondent: The weekly ones.

Interviewer: The weekly ones, the general meetings.

Respondent: General meetings. I just came to dominate briefly, briefly, because with my saying, 'Right, you talk about praxis, let's have a bit of practice and down you go to Grunwicks.' People did oppose me there because they said, 'Our work is more important.' Or 'It's a long way.' But I did win. I suspect many people didn't go but I did get an agreement that on the day of the mass picket lines at Grunwicks there would be no teaching, so nobody would miss out by attending the Grunwick

picket lines. And I think in the end, perhaps it wasn't even in the end, Stuart [Hall], I think he liked me, Stuart, I'm sure a lot of people say that to you, but Stuart did like me and I think he, kind of, respected me and said, 'Okay, okay, that's what we'll do then.'

Interviewer: So in terms of the general weekly meetings, it seems like politics, external politics, dominated those meetings that were also about the running of the centre.

Respondent: That's right.

Interviewer: So how did that play out? Obviously you were crucial in terms of the-

Respondent: The Grunwick thing. But I was never crucial in terms of the gender issue. I don't even remember myself speaking on the gender issues, actually. It could be that I spoke but I certainly don't remember having anything particularly useful to say. I admired the women who were – I was there with Lucy...

Interviewer: Bland?

Respondent: Bland, yes, I don't really know her but we run into each other every now and then, but she's a professor.

Interviewer: So the gender thing was going on in parallel to you, you were never at the heart of it?

Respondent: No, absolutely not.

Interviewer: Is that because your politics was elsewhere, really, with SW and things?

Respondent: Yes. It wasn't only that. I was also – I was focussing on education because that was, if you like... I mean, in a way that was a strange thing to be focussing on at the Centre because it was so much on the edge. There was Paul Willis there so it wasn't completely on the edge. And then there was Dan Finn as well; the book-

Interviewer: *Unpopular Education*.

Respondent: *Unpopular Education* was being formed. So, there was a little educational group and, in a way... So it was a mixture of my not being there – not being there all the time really did make a difference and my head still was partly involved in things to do with the union etc. I was quite a central figure; I was on [NATFHE's] National Council and so on. I found it hard to just simply walk away from all that. I was partly pre-occupied by a parallel existence so it was partly that. It was partly that my concern was education, it was partly my politics, so there were a variety of reasons.

Interviewer: Did you feel that you had – one of the things we are interested in is what daily life at the centre felt like and was like, and obviously you living in London and coming in presumably for particular days and stuff, would that affect...?

Respondent: No, I was living in Birmingham. I was living in Birmingham most of the time but only most of the time. I wouldn't be there during the holidays at all, for example.

Interviewer: I was going to ask if you can remember what the average working week at the centre was like? Obviously you had the general meetings and you had...

Respondent: Goodness me. You had the general meetings, you had whatever you call them, seminars or tutorials or whatever, seminars really, where people would present and then there would be a discussion. And the discussions were generally wonderful; they were lively, informed discussions which you felt at the end you had really – you'd got somewhere with. So I didn't have problems with that.

Interviewer: Were they ever competitive?

Respondent: Oh, yes!

Interviewer: In what sense?

Respondent: It's interesting you say that. I'd forgotten that. There was definitely a jockeying. I think that there was a jockeying to have your voice heard which I despised. I still would: I'm not that sort of person. There was a jockeying for affection particularly with Stuart but I was alright there because I knew he liked me (laughing), so, in a way, I was in a good position to-

Interviewer: To side step a bit there.

Respondent: To side step a bit.

Interviewer: But you felt there was a sense of people jostling for...?

Respondent: Absolutely, jostling for respect, jostling for future position, for future grants or scholarships or whatever, for publication...

Interviewer: What about in terms of the working papers?

Respondent: Yeah, yeah. In fact, I was lucky because they approached me, I didn't even know I was going to be published, I was very proud.

Interviewer: What was it like in terms of – because obviously group, an emphasis on collaboration and group work, and what was that like? I know you mentioned the sub-group.

Respondent: I mean, I was a bit older than quite a few people, but less confident. And I think gender did kind of – gender was an issue, I mean on a personal level as well as, if you like, at a centre level. I still came out of an era where women generally were not particularly successful. I had been remarkably successful considering. I think that also, to some extent, held me back but I think Andy [Green] and I tended to form an alliance in terms of the educational sub-group because he was also, at the time, an FE teacher so I think we were both bringing in some of the reality of how hard it is rather than just talking about high theory.

Interviewer: In a sense, you were coming from a background in practice in terms of your experience and lecturing in an FE college and it sounds like Andy was as well.

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: Did that make the actual group work difficult?

Respondent: That created... Yes. I think there was a slight tendency to just be slightly condescending towards me. To some extent, with reason. although I was reading up on theory; I read and I read and I read that year because what was I doing there if I wasn't going to immerse myself in the theoretical debates and discourses or whatever? So, you know, I was coming at it like a child who is dropped into a swimming pool and having to learn to swim very fast indeed. I remember, actually, I delivered a paper on Althusser when I said, 'This is rubbish.'

Interviewer: A brave thing to do though, I can imagine.

Respondent: Yes, because there were quite a few of them who thought Althusser was the bees knees. And I thought – I mean, I read and read and read Althusser: 'God, this is crap.' What Althusser had gone into is a kind of formalism. I hadn't read him before I arrived there but I saw him just as a Left functionalist, really. But, you know, he had a P.S. 'We cannot ignore class struggle.' Well, you can't pin a tail on like that. And so I was very critical that Althusser. I was also reading Gramsci and feeling much more sympathetic towards Gramsci. I think people saw me with some reason as a bit green, not being immersed in the debates, and not being an Althusserian which a lot of them were, didn't help. So there were reasons for them to look down on me a little bit.

Interviewer: When you have that presentation on Althusser and you said, 'This is rubbish,' can you remember anything about the response of your peer group?

Respondent: No. I can remember Stuart, and this is the only person I can remember, who – I think he thought that I was being a bit simplistic. I think he thought that I wasn't giving sufficient credit to the relative autonomy of the economic. I think he thought that I was knocking that – I wasn't taking that sufficiently seriously. He taught me a lesson, actually, because although no one will persuade me to take Althusser, well, to go with his analysis, that one has to actually be a little bit more subtle than perhaps I was being in terms of the relationship between the two. I felt ashamed that Stuart had had to say that to me.

Interviewer: How important was Stuart in all of this?

Respondent: He was crucial. Absolutely. What Stuart said ultimately went. He would sit and be absolutely quiet. It's interesting thinking, I had forgotten this, he would sit there and he wouldn't say anything, he would be sitting quietly and you know that smile that he has, that very quiet smile, and there would be noise going on all around him. And then at the end of the hour or whatever he would come up with a couple of sentences and that would be it. So he carried the torch. He was the scribe, that's not quite the right word. He represented the spirit and the testimony of the centre, yeah.

Interviewer: And what about his relationship with the other staff members? It would have been Michael and was it Richard?

Respondent: Richard.

Interviewer: Can you remember much – did people gravitate towards particular staff members?

Respondent: Yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: Some people gravitated towards Richard, others towards Stuart.

Respondent: Yeah, absolutely. I don't remember it closely enough but I remember thinking there are tensions there, actually, but I don't... That isn't just me being discreet, I don't remember that clearly enough.

Interviewer: Obviously the emphasis was on an attempt at least to try and breakdown the conventional relationship between academics and students. Was that... did you feel that?

Respondent: Yes, definitely. I mean, there was Paul Willis at the time and he was in a no-man's land which actually helped because he was both staff and student. That helped to lessen the differentiation. I think – I mean, Dan Finn was, to an extent, similarly. I think he was completing his PhD on something and... I think the staff took what the students said very seriously, actually. No, I

think... I would say that that was for real, that sense of ideas not being anybody's and nobody theoretically by virtue of their position being seen as having the better idea. But, having said all of that, Stuart was still the mouthpiece. I think in reality there was an expectation that the tutors would be there to tutor you and that you would listen to what they said. But both processes can take place at the same time.

Interviewer: Was there ever a demand for greater influence amongst the students?

Respondent: Actually, there might have been and I've forgotten. I think there was. I think there were people who said that general meeting has to be taken more seriously, and I can't remember who said it. I think there was, and in fact it might have come up from Lucy [Bland], might have come up from the women's faction, whatever you call them, saying we've got to take these ideas more seriously, therefore this forum needs to be taken more seriously. Yeah, there was.

Interviewer: Was there any relationship between the centre and the wider university, English department?

Respondent: No. I think some of the staff may have taught outside of the centre in the university but no. We were the most wonderful little island separated by an intellectual moat where we considered that everybody else was clearly inferior to us.

Interviewer: Seriously, was that kind of a sense amongst people?

Respondent: Absolutely. With reason. With reason. The stuff that was going on there was so innovative that there wasn't any parallel work being done anywhere at that point. Now there is. Now the ideas which they were coming up with, or we were coming up with, have become part of mainstream academia, but that wasn't the case then.

Interviewer: And what about the city of Birmingham, how important was that in the centre?

Respondent: Irrelevant.

Interviewer: Were external speakers ever invited from the city or...?

Respondent: No, not that I remember.

Interviewer: Do you feel the centre could have happened anywhere and it just happened to be in Birmingham?

Respondent: Yes. I think the person for who that was not the case was Paul Willis. Paul Willis though brought a connection because of his research, and good for him. I don't know what he is wearing now but at the time he was still wearing his leather jackets and his tight trousers. So he was still seeing himself as a lad about town and he wasn't going to not be a lad about town just because he was walking into the centre. So he brought a breadth of city in with him.

Interviewer: It was on an individual basis rather than an institutional basis.

Respondent: No structural basis at all, no.

Interviewer: Right, okay. And then just to finish up really, last few questions, this notion, the Gramsci notion of an organic intellectual that Stuart has written that that's what, in a sense, that at one point he thought the centre was for-to train organic intellectuals. Do you have any reflections on that? Did you see yourself as an organic intellectual? Obviously you came from a different perspective on these things.

Respondent: I think to be an organic intellectual you need a large working class or... one gets into problems about what one means about working class, but one needs a large radical movement to be an organic intellectual. If you look at the period from the end of the 70's, it has really been one of decline. Now, of course there was a miner's strike etc. I think that Stuart was – I think Stuart, partly because of his background- one can't forget he was black, he came from the Caribbean, he knew what struggle was about because of his own experiences. So he understood the concept, if you like, from within, of being an organic intellectual in a way that I would argue many of those people did not. So in a way you are having two processes taking place. There had been localised struggle, there had been occupations etc. But there hadn't been any kind of overarching struggle. This is what I talk to my friends about. If you look at something like the Socialist Workers' Party which I left twenty years ago or whatever but I still buy the stuff. You really feel the absence of theory. You don't feel that there are new ideas or enough new ideas anyway coming through in terms of the present conjuncture, the present situation, and that is partly because of the way in which struggle has contracted and SW is looked inward.

Interviewer: That leads me on nicely to the next question really which is the influence that the centre had subsequently for you in your life.

Respondent: For me?

Interviewer: Yeah, for you, because obviously it's interesting because there's a notion of the organic intellectual, but a lot of people at the centre also went off to have quite conventional academic careers.

Respondent: Absolutely, well, almost all of them did. They climbed up the greasy pole. I mean look at all of them. They are all professors. Although I don't actually agree with Stuart and some of his stuff but he has never compromised. He has always hailed to, kind of, the importance of fundamental change and you can see that in terms of his own life. Wherever you look now, and I mean people who are slightly younger than me are just at the age now where they have reached the professorships or they reached the professorship five/ten years ago, and everywhere you look in terms of all these little cultural studies faculties, there they are. They have seeded; the centre has seeded all these places. That did not have the same effect on me at all. I went back to Kilburn, I made a decision ... I thought I'm not going their way.

Interviewer: You could see, at the time then, where they were going.

Respondent: Absolutely. I'm actually quite good at that sort of thing. And I went back to Kilburn, the FE college that I was at and I did it deliberately, and I continued to teach my under-privileged students. They gained an enormous amount from my experience at the centre.

Interviewer: Did it influence it then, the art of teaching?

Respondent: Completely, oh yeah. It made me very zappy. I think I was a very good teacher. But, of course, I wrote as well; I continued to write about education. Ironically, I think that in a way the most obvious impact, I'm not saying the most important, has been since I retired, because since I retired I have produced one book which you are going to read which has its roots in the perspectives of cultural studies. It is a book written almost out of cultural studies for cultural studies. And the book that I've just written has been based upon in depth interviews of twelve people to do with

their experience of themselves as second generation which is, again, a complete product of a cultural studies approach... yeah.

Interviewer: So, in a sense, there's a lot of emphasis on organic intellectuals. It goes against the philosophy of an organic intellectual to go into another career and become a professor.

Respondent: Absolutely.

Interviewer: You could argue that the trajectory that you've had is actually more in keeping with this notion of being an organic intellectual.

Respondent: I agree, except that I haven't been sufficiently involved in a struggle.

Interviewer: A lot more than some people.

Respondent: A lot more than some people, that's right. That's true.

Interviewer: Looking back on that, is there a sense of pride or how do you conceptualise it, especially in relation to these various professors?

Respondent: How do I conceptualise it? Well, there is a slightly complication which is that I had a child who was born in 1987 and I thought I had a father too: a partner, and it turned out I didn't have a partner. So I brought up this child by myself. My father died... and my mother went crazy – my mother became... whatever. So that really – actually talking about this upsets me. But really for, I don't know, 10/15 years I found it very, very hard to keep my head above water. I was not sinking but not that far off. And in that period of time I did not write a word, just surviving was difficult. I had a serious interruption, I don't like the word career because of its connotations, but I had a very serious interruption to my career. My mother only died four or five – my God, I can't remember, four or five years ago and I have been incredibly productive in the last four or five years. I was the only daughter, it's quite complicated, I won't go into the complications, but I was the only child and I had really – my external career became completely – was cut across by being a mother and having to look after my mother. I'm very conscious of that.

Interviewer: Again, that fits into the thing we were talking about earlier about choosing to take a certain route, coming from a particular background, it's on the outside of this academic notion of a career and living in the real world.

Respondent: That's right. I was a single parent so I didn't have any support, 'I had no support for nothing' kind of thing. I didn't have a wife, I didn't have... Am I proud? I don't know. I'm someone who doesn't claim pride very well. I don't know.

Interviewer: I was going to ask you just finally, it's quite a difficult question and a bit of a broad one, but what do you think were the conditions or structures if you like that made the centre what it was and so successful at the time? What factors do you think were the crucial things that created the centre whilst you were there?

Respondent: 1968.

Interviewer: 1968. That's easy.

Respondent: 1968 made the centre possible. The resurgence of non - Stalinist left ideas, their viability; the development of French philosophical – I know I've slated it, but nevertheless the development of French left Marxist philosophical ideas ... The fact that in Britain there was a large left at that time, that there was a – at that point, there was a struggle, ha, that there was a struggle against, to some extent, the Labour government but absolutely against the Tories and their attempt to restrict the Trade Unions, and the miner's won that strike [against the Heath government]. So there was a seed bed, there were the ideas, there was the possibility of change, and I suppose into that was Stuart Hall with his particular background and the fact he was black which one mustn't underestimate. So I think all those things just came together.

Interviewer: And, in a sense, was the Centre an echo of that politics continuing throughout the 70's and into the 80's?

Respondent: Yes, it was more than an echo. I suppose echoes do reverberate, don't they?

Interviewer: I suppose that undermines it a little bit but it was a product of it, if you like.

Respondent: Yes, it was. It was. As long as echo carries within it the idea of an echo chamber, I think echo is quite a nice word.

[End of Transcript]