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Kieran Connell: So I was going to begin by asking really - you did your undergraduate in Cambridge, how did you end up coming to Birmingham in 1970?

Stuart Laing: Well I did – yeah I did, let's just scroll back a little bit, you always need a little bit of history... I was brought up on a council estate but when you say the "council estate", it was in Epsom in Surrey which rather destroys the real edge of the story. Nevertheless I came from a reasonably lower middle class, working class background. My father was a mental nurse and my mother did office work and stuff and they both left school at 15 and whatever. But anyway – but I got – as you did in the 50s, I got an 11 Plus scholarship to a day public school in Wimbledon. So by the time I kind of got to the university level, I was already quite acculturated into that kind of thing, in the sense in which I went to Cambridge as somebody from a poorer background, but not one of those really kind of gritty – I had a friend who was at Cambridge who came from Carlisle whose rather was a train – operated a train in an engineering work or something. I mean it wasn't quite like that but reading English had a bit of an edge and the Master at the school that I'd been at was a (?big leave aside), so there was this sense – even though he wasn't at all Left wing in any sense at all, there was something about literature as something that commented on society and all the rest of it. So turning up at Cambridge in 1967, knowing Raymond Williams was there already, being in that kind of – well we're going to study literature but we're going to relate it to society and stuff like that. And also while I was there in my final year, I started going to a seminar that Stephen Heath was running on semiotics. He'd just come back from Paris working with Roland Barthes and this was extremely new at this time; in fact I signed up because I wanted to know what it was. So I had a kind of interest in some Raymond Williams type stuff and semiotics and when I went to see the careers guy in Cambridge and he said, "What are you going to do?" And we talked and chatted for a bit and eventually I said, "Well I thought I might do post-graduate" and he said, "Yes brilliant, go and do that" because he couldn't find any job for me to do. So I thought, "Well I might as well do that". And I was looking around and saw in the – I think I said to you earlier before we put the tape on, I mean I was at the University Faculty Library and the (inaudible 0:02:44) there was a poster there for the Centre, which I didn't know anything about.

Kieran Connell: This one?

Stuart Laing: Well it's not the one that's in there, but it's that kind of a thing you know, that kind of a – and I thought, "Oh that looks interesting" so I wrote off and got sent some stuff, like some of the early reports and probably some of the stuff I've passed to you; some of those working papers probably. And I thought, "This looks really interesting", I didn't have a topic or anything but in those days you could get – I'd got a first class marks in my Year 2 at Cambridge. In those days it was easier to get a grant to do postgraduate work without really saying what you were going to do. You just did it on the basis that you were good. So I applied to... I'm trying to think, I'm not sure whether it's the Department of Education or the British Academy in those days, but anyway whichever one it was, and I got – they said, "Potentially you can have this grant" and so I went up in the Easter and I wrote off to Birmingham and said – and they invited me up around Easter time for an interview which I took the train up from Cambridge to Birmingham and as I was saying earlier, I kind of got all dressed up and these three guys in bush jackets, Richard Dyer, Trevor and Stuart Hall interviewed me and they said, "You can come". So I turned up there at Birmingham in – I'd never been to Birmingham before as a city, other than for the interview and I got married in the summer as well, but that's a different narrative really. So anyway we turned up in Birmingham and I didn't really – I couldn't quite – I was thinking I don't quite remember when I settled on the PhD topic actually; it must have been quite early. I think originally I wanted to do something on science fiction! But I didn't have any topic. But I fixed on the topic quite quickly and I think I was the first person there who wasn't supervised by Stuart; in fact Michael was my main supervisor, which was fine. And I found it was an extraordinarily interesting place to be because there was all these different people with all these different ideas in all these different places and the ideas which to some extent had emerged in the late 60s out of the student movement about students should have more control over their curriculum and all that stuff, but really instantiated as a kind of major principle of the operation. So off we went and we went straight into the Reader seminars and my thesis and...

Kieran Connell: What was it like? Can you give us a bit of context around these like 1970/71 - ? I know you may have joined I don't know, in the middle of these debates but what was the - ?

Stuart Laing: Well I think the – actually it seemed to me that the debates really were moving into a particular political and theoretical phase which they'd only been – they'd just been kind of dancing around before. Partly that was to do I think with Richard going to Paris and Stuart taking over, although I think it's not – it was also about that time. I mean I think Richard probably went to Paris because he realised that what he'd set going was good, but it wasn't really him anymore. So I think – so there was a sense that the Reader debates were actually a way of saying, “We are now going to ground what we're doing in some serious theory and we're going to give ourselves the weapons to engage with the Sociologists and engage with anybody else and out-think them and out-argue them if we needed to” so we really needed to know our stuff. We needed to know the Sociology, we needed to know the French Theorists, we needed to know the Ethno-Methodologists, we needed to know all this stuff in order to – rather than being seen as kind of lightweight froth on the surface, to be seen as a kind of grounded serious intellectual enterprise. And that was quite – well not divisive – that was contentious because there were some people who say – because actually it also meant people said, “Well we should be studying topics that are serious” and people like Richard Dyer were saying, “Well no I think we should be studying the monarchy and entertainment and stuff like that” and even Chaz saying, “We should be studying football”, there was a sense in which somehow we should be studying things that were manifestly serious.

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Kieran Connell: What about Humanism, the kind of Humanism versus Theoreticism?

Stuart Laing: Yes kind of that, kind of that and (inaudible 0:07:20) or Empiricism, yeah. So it was – yeah and there was a sense you know that if you're studying media you probably should study the news, not – I mean I remember Richard in one of his early articles in the working papers was a thing on Tom Jones which was very interesting I think. But there was a kind of sense, well if the Centre was studying Tom Jones and the monarchy, people would say, “What's this all about?” you know, “Is this serious? What's happening?” And even though part of the point of going into it was to say that popular stuff could be serious, there was a kind of real dilemma – there was a reaction against I think the sort of – the sort of popular (arch?) so if you take the book of Stuart Hall and Paddy Wornell in '64 you know that kind of a book wouldn't have got written in the early 70s by the people in the Centre because it would have seemed too much just dabbling in popular culture. I mean there were different views -

Kieran Connell: Too lightweight almost?

Stuart Laing: Kind of yeah, people were doing different things. I mean there was a lot of stuff going on there, I mean you know it's like all these things when people say, “Oh the Birmingham School...” and you think when you were there, there were just so many different things going on.

Kieran Connell: How fragmentary was it in these periods?

Stuart Laing: Well I suppose – well I don't know about “fragmentary”, I mean because people had the sense that they wanted to argue about the same thing, in a sense it brought you together. You felt there was something you were trying to argue about that was – you know – mattered, that you shared, even if you often debated what it was. So the people at the margins and the people like Chris Berguson who just thought, “These are a load of – “ forgive this language, “- a load of intellectual wankers” you know and, “I just want to hang out and celebrate rock music” or whatever or – because he refers in there to Chandler Brossard who was there I think – he was visiting from America, who was of course somebody from the Beat Generation in the States, so there was that kind of sense of, “What is the ambience of the place?” So there were lots of different things going on and more came later, because in the first year I was there, there was hardly any Feminist thought going on. There were a few women there, but even the work they were doing – it wasn't until the second year that some people came in like Marina (Comarko?) and others – Janice...

Kieran Connell: Did Feminism then become sort of more - ?

Stuart Laing: Well it started to become a bit of an issue. I think it wasn't really until I left that things cut up a bit rough I think, but it was beginning to be more of a kind of – you know people were saying, "Well this still feels very male dominated" you know? But that was at the beginning; I think it didn't really blow up until a year or two after I'd gone.

Kieran Connell: What about Politics in the Centre? Because I was reading that paper that Stuart wrote called "The Mis-Moment" and one of the things he was saying was, "We're not political enough; we need to connect the politics we're doing outside with what we do inside".

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Stuart Laing: Yeah I think that was tricky because I think most people who were there had, in one way or another, a political affiliation of a Left-ish kind one way or the other. I mean probably all, not most. Not everybody had the same view about how you connected the politics and the intellectual work and some of that was about degrees of political commitment maybe and some of it was maybe just about how they tried to separate those things. And I mean I haven't re-read that; I was thinking of re-reading some of this stuff, so I don't know – are you going to digitalise all of this stuff eventually?

Kieran Connell: If we get the time, yeah.

Stuart Laing: Because I was going to re-read some of that stuff and – because thinking about the point you raised, which is – because I remember, after being there a while, Stuart wrote one of these papers and I thought – I read it and I thought, "Well are we being told off?" because I was still quite new and, "What is – what's the context of what's being said?" And I suppose looking back now I think although it was probably easier to survive then than it is now. We were probably working at the limits of what the Institution would allow I would have thought then and if the thing had got more political as an enterprise, I think in an explicit way, I think arguably it would have shut down sooner. So I – whether – I don't know what Stuart would say about it although he probably doesn't want to be bothered with all that now. But it seemed to me pretty pragmatically that probably he was demanding more than was possible. Now it may be because I was on the side of the people who were being criticised rather than the kind of gung-ho people but it was a very live issue. It was a very lively issue operationally in terms of people's commitment, in terms of the work you were trying to do and everybody was engaged in that discussion one way or another. Some people obviously said, "Well my political work is done through this intellectual work which will change minds and (inaudible 0:12:32) people would say, "Well we connect this to running (?Portihall Road) or writing the free press or doing other sorts of things you know. So it was – and the different positions as I say were different, but they were articulated around some common sense of purpose; otherwise there'd be nothing to be different about.

Kieran Connell: Which was Cultural - ?

Stuart Laing: Which was Cultural Studies and the notion of Cultural Studies was an intervention, both in its content and in its ways of working, that was needed to explain what was happening in contemporary life, was needed to change ways of working in higher education and elsewhere and you know was needed to influence things elsewhere.

Kieran Connell: How did the collective approach work in practice?

Stuart Laing: Well I think it was very important because you know – especially in the Humanities and Social Sciences then – less so now, but the collective notion now is done often in a different way, that the notion of going in and, "This is work we are doing together and it's collectively owned". You had your own thesis to do and all that, but the other work was... so trying to break with the notion of some of this work as being your individual thing you were doing, rather than part of a collective enterprise. So what you were doing related to what other people are doing, or maybe you were just – you were working together on something. So it actually was an attempt to change the mind set and for me that was profoundly important; it was new, it was different, it was transformative to be asked to think like that seriously and push it through. So you'd sit down and say, "Okay we're going to talk together

about what we do and who's going to do this and who's going to do that and decisions will be made collectively and there'll be discussions about who's not pulling their weight and all this kind of stuff. And I don't think now – even where you have perhaps more collective work in Humanities and Social Sciences than you had then generally, it's not necessarily conceived of in that way. It's more kind of, "Well we're an operational group and we'll get things done", but that's like kind of any organisation. This was some notion of collective purpose that you bought into and debated and formed and was, as far as it could be, democratic. So that was profound I think, profoundly important. Yeah of course it didn't achieve everything people wanted it to...

Kieran Connell: What was Stuart Hall's kind of – like how did he kind of deal with - ?

Stuart Laing: Well I think it was extraordinarily difficult his role, because on the one hand you know I think he had to operate within the organisation of the university and for most of us we didn't see enough of that to realise, as I do now, what an incredible strain it must have been to have had to keep the space open against all kinds of financial and other issues – you know just the normal issues in a way, to do all that, but at the same – and to take the responsibility of running the place, but at the same time try to engender a sense of collective work within it, when at the same time being the most exceptional mind I've ever met – ever – bar none, and you know in that sense there was this dilemma; here was Stuart who clearly knew more than the rest of us, was brilliantly intelligent, perceptive you know just – and you had to all the time to say, "But he must not be seen as you know our kind of divine leader". Now I think people didn't, but to live that out, you know I suspect in the end where he left for the OU it just burnt him out I should imagine and we talked to him about that after ten years of that when he went to the OU he probably just got to point – well you know there's times when you've done all you can in one place and I think he probably thought, "This can't go on"; an extraordinary achievement.

Kieran Connell: Did it ever get competitive like in terms of the project? You know like was there sort of jostling for positions and that kind of thing going on or - ?

Stuart Laing: Not really, no I don't think in that sense. I think people were... no I think people were interested in what other people were doing and I noted one thing in there was somebody was saying, "Well all those people who have got grants are able to do this and we're not" but that was rare and no I don't think – it wasn't really individually competitive in that sense. I mean there was a lot of arguing and a lot of mutual criticism and occasionally bits of bad feeling. But it wasn't so much – it was just genuinely thinking that you were right and the other person was wrong. It wasn't so much kind of thinking there was some special place in the hierarchy you needed to be, I don't think.

Kieran Connell: And just finally because I know you're busy –

Stuart Laing: That's all right.

Kieran Connell: - I want to ask about your reflections about like the extent to which – I mean higher education has obviously gone through incredible changes since that period, you know, could something like that ever be created in the contemporary context?

Stuart Laing: Well I think – yeah, what that was was an intervention in a particular historical moment which I think – well "necessary" is the wrong word but was created out of that moment and responded to things that were going on at that moment, you know. Let me say what I mean by that... there obviously were sets of things going on in the world that the contemporary disciplines couldn't really explain or come to grips with and there were also things about trying to re-conceptualise what certain kinds of research and university work might be for or to at least revise them. I mean you wouldn't do that again because you don't – in that form, because you don't need to do it now. It's been done and in a sense, for better or worse, a lot of those areas of work that were developed there – and in other places too, but you know are now widespread everywhere.

Kieran Connell: The (?cost) of the disciplines...

Stuart Laing: Yeah, which is good, you know and the fact that people are doing all sorts of things under the name of "Cultural Studies" I don't much like but it doesn't worry me all that much in the sense in which there's also a lot going on. So in a way the Centre performed its historical mission and in a way it

was right that it's not there any more frankly. You know I mean obviously the way things happened is one thing. However, the lessons I learned from that are 1) there is a place for interventions of a radical kind in universities that deal with specific situations and needs to move things on and which require new and different ways of working. We've got one here which is in some ways completely different in our community-university partnership work, which I'm very committed to and will probably carry on working on a bit after I retire. For me, that's the equivalent of the Centre; not because it looks anything like it, but because it's about saying, "At this historical moment, there's new kinds of interventions needed. We need to stretch the sense of the Institution, we need to connect externality issues, so the work that I'm talking about is very much to do with the distribution of university knowledge into community groups and social enterprises and stuff like that. So it's a particular kind of way of restructuring how we think about university as far as I'm concerned. And I learnt a lot from the Centre I think, including about ideas of collaborative work, including being prepared to think in new ways, including how you work within certain sorts of institutions to deliver radical things. And there are probably lots of other examples around – or could be – of things like that – "interventions" I would call it, of the kind the Centre was in whatever it is that's needed now. You wouldn't do this again, because you know we're not at the stage where television has just emerged and we've just come out of the Second World War and affluence is with us and all that stuff. I mean you know – but there are different historical moments and I think –

Kieran Connell: The conjuncture is different now.

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Stuart Laing: The conjuncture, exactly, and what kind of intellectual coalition you put together and on what terms to do things is a judgement I think people should make. So the lesson I would take from this is how you identify and response, develop something in that conjuncture, live it through, how people work together sometimes, patterns of working together and you know go through all those questions about how do you communicate what you're doing in what form and what – in what way and to what audience and all that stuff? So if anybody could ever write the full history of the Centre – because I haven't seen anything at the moment that's – well no, I mean anybody who was in something never thinks people can write about it, but there haven't been any serious attempts to do it really. I mean there were one or two silly books by one or two idiots but – I mean really silly – I may have missed some good stuff but I mean I think there probably is something about that – those ways of working and those sorts of debates and those kinds of coalitions of interests and what they released. I suspect in this – in here, in these things, particularly in some of the stuff that Stuart wrote if it hasn't already been mined is some really rich stuff about -

Kieran Connell: Really rich stuff.

Stuart Laing: - you know different kinds of issues of linking politics and intellectual work and all sorts of things. So if anybody has ever got time to dig around in it, I'd love to read it.

Kieran Connell: Well thank you very much for your time.

Stuart Laing: Not at all, it was a pleasure.

[End of Transcript]