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John Ellis: I can remember... I mean, he and Stuart were old mates, and Stuart got him to come to the centre to one of the seminars, are you talking about the same event or something different?

Kieran Connell: Well, it culminated in a history workshop conference in Oxford in '79 where Richard Johnson, Stuart Hall and EP Thompson shared a podium, and Thompson just launched into this ferocious debate, an attack on the Centre's work. Is the context poverty of theory and such like, but I didn't know – presumably was he invited some years earlier then?

John Ellis: Oh yes. There had been a – he did a seminar when I was there and certainly I was long gone by 1979. I'm just trying to think of the years that I was there, doing the maths properly... I started in the Autumn of 1973, I did a Master's thesis in about a year which was about Ealing Comedies and that gave me – or, rather, during that process got involved with Screen Magazine and they published a part of it eventually. So I then embarked on a PhD which I never did much work on and got diverted into all of those debates about what is ideology, what is the nature of this project, what is subjectivity and culture, and so out of that comes a book called *Language and Materialism* I co-wrote with Ros and that was as a result of feeling marginalised in the Centre which, in retrospect, everybody was, and the worst thing that could possibly have been called was 'The Centre'. Everybody calls it 'The Centre'. It wasn't 'The Centre', it wasn't self-marginal, and if we'd actually realised we were all marginal and clinging on to this raft it would have been a better experience possibly. So certainly the EP Thompson thing was beginning well before 1979 because Thompson came and gave a seminar where he denounced Altizerians. And this may be wishful thinking but I think somebody was there who said, 'Well, actually, a lot of your view of history is what Altizer is writing about in his theorisation of history.' But it was visceral with Thompson, he didn't like the language, he didn't like that kind of Marxism, and he probably knew enough about the French scene to know Altizer was aligned differently. But that would have been then certainly probably 1976 or 1977 he came and did that seminar.

Kieran Connell: So it was leading up to it.

John Ellis: Yeah, it was leading up to it, because we left, we moved to London and effectively severed links with the Centre in 1977.

Kieran Connell: How did you start there to begin with? What was the appeal of it?

John Ellis: My motivation was a bit strange in a way. I did an English degree at Cambridge and I encountered semiotics and film as rather separate things, but got taught by Stephen Heath in my final year, and I was also at the same time editing a student magazine which was a listings based magazine, a bit like *Time Out* really on a small scale, and we had political reporting in there as well. So by the end of that rather intense set of experiences I didn't know what the hell to do, and so rather than presenting the journalism for student journalism award and going in that direction, I tried to find some kind of place around film, and probably it was Stephen Heath who said, 'Well, there's this interesting place in Birmingham where you can do that kind of work.' Because at that time there was nothing; you couldn't look at cinema academically, especially in terms of things to do with content, ideology, production and that's what I was interested in was the how it was done stuff. And so it was there or nowhere for that work, but whether I was cut out to be an academic I don't know. That was the appeal. And I was sufficiently of the Left, as everybody was.

Kieran Connell: Did you arrive mentally politically formed then?

John Ellis: No, I wasn't. I had not been a member – I'd been running a – I'd been in Cambridge, for God's sake, not exactly – and I'd been involved in student politics in Cambridge and needed up running a magazine which reported on student politics, and I did a certain amount of that myself so I knew enough about – I knew the political map, I knew what the parties were and what they stood for, and I knew that I wasn't a member of any of them. Further in my background, my father was a local councillor for the Conservatives and things so I'd always known how politics is. So that was a

significant part of – that was it, double whammy really. And then I arrived there and it was different to how I expected, but I didn't have any expectations, but it's in bloody Birmingham. It was not a good time for Birmingham, that mid-1970's certainly wasn't a good time politically, it wasn't a good time nationally and it certainly wasn't a good time for the city of Birmingham. It's complicated. If you think about the worst place in the country where you could put an intellectual enterprise to re-think the really difficult issue of political identity, political and cultural attachments and the nature of social change in consumerist society then you wouldn't want to put it in Birmingham. You would need it to be in a place where there's a lot of that stuff going on. What was going on in Birmingham at that time was Longbridge. The cultural activities around were really – there was the arts lab and people like Stuart (inaudible 0:07:46) and so on involved in that, but there was really not that depth of cultural critique and so on that was going on. There was a major BBC production centre down the road, Helena cocked up with that, so it wasn't the right place to be. Because the politics that was there was urgent and strident and so on, a lot of people went and got involved in that. So, for instance, somebody I really regret, Robin Rusher, for instance, you've probably heard of Robin-

Kieran Connell: Yeah.

[0:08:23]

John Ellis: He and Ian Connell who I shared a house with them in my first year, and they went off, towards the end of that year they got involved in Big Flame, the only political movement named after a television show, and also lead by someone who is now television executive, Alan Haley.

Kieran Connell: Was he in Chambers in the...?

John Ellis: Ian and Robin went together, they acted as a unit, they both went off. I think Ian at some point because of personal involvement with Lydia Curti managed to rescue himself from this thing but it consumed Robin, took him a long time to get back, was just getting himself really sorted and then cycling uphill, whack, heart attack, dead. It was really tragic. He was just beginning to re-make contacts and see what all of that troops out involvement was about.

Kieran Connell: So why was it so all-encompassing do you think? Just the nature of the...

John Ellis: The nature of that kind of small group, large issue, agitational work. And also the fact that they didn't have a 9 – 5, they were a set of students, so there was no counter balance. And there was always that pull to get involved in this politics, and the Centre at that point was an extremely male operation. When I arrived in 1973, there were Rachel Powell and there was Janice Winship, there were two women. And joining with me was Rachel Harris. Then Ros came the following year.

Kieran Connell: Was Ros Brunt there?

John Ellis: Ros Brunt, no, Ros Brunt... I think, no, she wasn't there in my first year certainly, she came maybe the second year. Ros Coward came as well and joined me there. There were more women coming in that following intake, but it was a very male culture.

Kieran Connell: When you say male culture, was it quite macho?

John Ellis: Yes, it was quite macho. Because there had been that ESRC thing, none of us really understood what the bloody hell was going on, there was this ESRC thing about the sub cultures thing and coming in afterwards... You are joining an operation where Stuart had just been – well, actually, was he even then confirmed as Hoggart's successor? I think in my first year he was not even Hoggart's – he was the designated but he was not the director at the Centre.

Kieran Connell: Acting.

John Ellis: He was acting, yes. And then there was Michael Grinn, and that was your lot.

Kieran Connell: Until Richard.

John Ellis: Two supervisors for how many PhD students? Crazy! And a pretty major ESRC project on sub cultures which was a group study. You've got Tony and so on working on that, they were quite new, they did work as a real group, so there was a group of four or five working class men.

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Kieran Connell: So it was Chas, Tony, Brian, Stuart was involved in that.

John Ellis: And Ian. There was a real group of working class men who were the single big group and they (inaudible 0:12:15) because they had been working quite closely with Stuart and so on, they really set the tone, and that was hard for other people to deal with.

Kieran Connell: Was it quite closed?

John Ellis: They were quite closed but you had this Monday seminar where you talked about theory and so on. You had Stuart who was not properly in a position of leadership and arguably Stuart actually – I think he found leadership for all sorts of reasons that were obvious and less obvious as it were, he found leadership difficult, and what he found particularly difficult was the way people interpolated him as leader. He didn't want to occupy that position. But, at the same time, Stuart had more to say and he knew more than anybody else in the room, in the place. He had got a substantial history that nobody else had, he engaged with all these texts which at that time were utterly exotic, Marx's theory, what? 1973. There was stuff not translated, basic stuff not even translated, like prison notebooks that were just appearing. The big thing when I was there was the Penguin publication of Marx's Grundrisse, so thrown into the middle of that without having properly at all read capital. You are looking at – there was something else that you needed to know first.

Kieran Connell: On the one hand, I guess, there was an express commitment there to go beyond the conventional staff student relations and-

John Ellis: It was a collective rolling seminar and, again, if it had not been in Birmingham it would have worked, I think, and it would have been really something. If it had been in the University of London, if it had been in Edinburgh, if it had been somewhere that had a real supportive wider culture that would allow people to have an external life-

Kieran Connell: So what you're saying is, in a sense, the lack of-

John Ellis: Lack of externality was a real problem.

Kieran Connell: It became too intense and there was too much focus.

John Ellis: Yes, it became too intense and also real conformity pressures. Everything you had, your only reason for being there, your only function in the place and so on was to do with something that called itself 'The Centre'. You could see a decent movie a week if you were lucky. I did some film reviewing for the student paper, I went to see all sorts of wonderful things. I remember Angela Robbie came to a preview-

Kieran Connell: I've literally just come from meeting her, actually.

John Ellis: I remember Angela saying meeting Slade, it was in the days when cinemas were still a kind of business, and Slade did this actually rather good movie that nobody forgets, so they came to the press show in Birmingham, met this scummy individual who crawled out the woodwork to review it, and for some reason I said to Angela, 'Come along to this.' And so she came, and she gets up with Noddy Holder and says, 'Don't you think you are terribly sexist.' And Noddy Holder just looks at her and smiles and says, 'Yes, that's the point.' That sticks in my mind for some reason. So you are trying to break out but it really wasn't... as a PhD student, you're adrift from the rest of the world.

Kieran Connell: How did the broader - you mentioned Big Flame but, of course, there's a massive spectrum of politics-

John Ellis: Yeah, you had Colin Sparkes there who was on the National Exec of Socialist Worker Party.

[0:16:17]

Kieran Connell: How did that all fit together? Did it fit together?

John Ellis: Well, I think that's the good question, it fitted around being blokes. It fitted around being blokes, going to the pub and that kind of thing where you had a structure in which you could negotiate your differences. And also to establish the complex patterns of deference. So Colin didn't push his politics, he advised me not to be a member of his party, well, very good advice, he says either you'll break the party or the party will break you, and I can't see you breaking the party. So that's another reason why on all sorts of levels the eruption of a feminist agenda rather later than the rest of the world was profoundly disruptive to all sorts of things that kept the place going.

Kieran Connell: Were you there when feminism came in because it came in around the mid-seventies?

John Ellis: Yes, I think the first articulation probably was on the level of theory. There were some women there who sought refuge in being intensively empirical. Ros was refusing that and was saying – this is Ros Coward, was refusing that and saying, actually, there's a problem with your theory of ideology.

Kieran Connell: I guess someone like Dorothy Hobson's work which was very much ethnographic on the sense of housewives view-

John Ellis: Dorothy was later on. Dorothy was later on.

Kieran Connell: But Ros was making the point-

John Ellis: Ros was making that point towards the end of '74 and beginning of '75.

Kieran Connell: In the piece that-

John Ellis: That stuff was – when that stuff was not known, was not translated, and that's why we went off to write language materials because it was, in some ways, a massive seminar paper. You couldn't actually articulate why you thought that something like psychoanalysis had something to say in this arena.

Kieran Connell: I don't know if you have any reflections of how this debate developed, how it first came in and then the reaction amongst you...

John Ellis: The two of us, we walked away from it. That really was the thing. We left, and Ros's piece in *Screen* is a sort of justification of why she had had enough. And other people came along and did it differently.

Kieran Connell: So you felt there basically wasn't a space for that kind of poststructuralist kind of approach.

John Ellis: Yes, you used eccentric to the Centre was a particular phrase. It was too much to be bringing in at once, and Stuart, of course, Stuart knew what it was about, and Stuart was doing the encoding, decoding, all that kind of thing was actually his attempt to negotiate a whole set of problems. For him, that comes out in his work on Thatcherism, why, and all of that. So Stuart knew perfectly well what was going on but in terms of managing this organisation where all this stuff was happening that's entirely other kind of question. There he was, he had small children, he had a wife who was involved in other levels on this, it was not for one person to be able to achieve, he could only do so much.

Kieran Connell: Yeah, sure. Do you think there were political reasons as well for the argument that developed? Re-reading Ros's piece on the train down here, at one point she makes the point that the Centre's determination to retain this element of – this element of the economic base...

John Ellis: That's what it seemed like at the time was actually there were a lot of people who did want to cling onto some kind of notion of economic determinism which played out in the individual. And it's that bit, I think, looking back was the really difficult thing.

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Kieran Connell: The agency of people to decode it, something that they-

John Ellis: Well, the agency of people to... it's linked to belief in rationality.

Kieran Connell: So humanism tradition.

John Ellis: Yes, it's the kind of idea which does haunt a certain kind of Marxism that if only you knew the truth about your condition, your position, then you would be able to act differently. History is a little more complicated than that, and that's why I say economic determinist, yes, but it doesn't play out in the individual in that way because individuals have imaginations themselves and projects of their own and all the rest of it, and they are acting to a significant degree blindly and, actually, collectivities of individuals act blindly, political parties. And you can interpret history very differently by introducing a much bigger dimension of more by luck than judgment into the equation, to put it crudely. And that's really what it was about. There was – base superstructure was the kind of starting point for the debates still and so those kinds of complexities of determination and over determination, that kind of way in which Althusserian theory went into psychoanalysis and talked about particular moments where everything gets to be too much. The implication of that, of course, is explained to the Russian revolution very neatly and it uses the notion of the weakest link, but it leaves you a big problem of ordinary determination, which, actually, works in very messy ways and it's the mess; academics, intellectuals, don't tolerate mess.

Kieran Connell: Do you think these debates-

John Ellis: And then you've got all this bloody empirical work going on which was probably usually much richer than the conclusions that were drawn from it, because suddenly when you started drawing conclusions you went back to the (inaudible 0:24:13) and there was – I remember, yeah, there is a piece that's re-printed I did of linguistic analysis and that comes out – these people came down and we slaughtered them, we weren't nice to them, and presented this work they'd done in Glasgow just about people, bus crews, talking when they were just on the break. And they'd taken chunks of conversation and they analysed them and done this and done that, and I just took the same chunks and did something completely different with them, and that was all to do with what you hear in what people say and whether what you are looking for determines what you find, or whether you're actually going to listen properly, which is very hard.

Kieran Connell: Do you think these debates were, to some extent, emblematic of the Left...?

John Ellis: Oh yes. We went on our own. No, it was a complete-

Kieran Connell: Because the Centre was being attacked by Thompson for being theoreticians and by the *Screen* people for being too empirical perhaps. Do you think, in a sense, that this period of history-

John Ellis: The *Screen* people were interested in films. They were interested in films, most of them, and everything else took second place and that's why the stuff survives, in a way. It's there as a sophisticated attempt to understand an object. I think, yeah, no I think the seventies was a big car crash. You got - on a meta level you had complete political impasse. You had traditional trade unions that were exercising power but had no strategy in relation to the power they had, and you had governments that couldn't actually think or act their way out of a paper bag at the same time, and you had an economy that was not giving anybody anything and stuff was crashing around your ears. If you think of it, visually you look back and you think, actually, it was really dirty, wasn't it? The streets were dirty, and that's nothing to do with grave diggers on strike crap, it was actually routinely. Infrastructure was declining, the lack of public investment, the lack of private initiative, both at the same time, it was awful. And so nobody knew where they were going, nobody knew what was going

to happen, but everybody knew that what was going on was grossly inadequate, and then along came Thatcher and imposed a solution, a horrible solution, but now we are here.

[0:27:24]

Kieran Connell: Maybe as well in terms of the Left, particularly fragmentation of the identity point. I guess one could argue that it's not really recovered since that's – it's gone off on some different tangents or it's...

John Ellis: Capitalism collapsed and where were Marxists when you needed them? Nowhere. Stunning silence. That was the crisis that we were all waiting for in the 1970's. And it happened.

Kieran Connell: What about class in the Centre? We've talked about gender, and touched upon class a little bit, but was that an issue in how that collective worked? Was there a sense that people had been working class carried a certain amount of kudos?

John Ellis: Well, yeah, but to give credit to everybody they didn't actually – there was nothing explicit. It was maleness rather than class but then that is a class divide. Different classes deal with gender division differently and so the pub culture and so on was a significant dimension of that. No, people weren't in your face with it, it was more internalised than that, you internalised it for yourself, you felt you didn't have the right to talk necessarily because when you opened your mouth, the un-classic English thing, when you open your mouth a certain kind of thing was being said in addition to your words. There was certainly that, but I think it was not from the listeners but from the speakers.

Kieran Connell: What about the mechanics of this collective work, how did that compare to some of the previous or subsequent experience of collective work? Did it work?

John Ellis: It did. There was a fantastic commitment of trying to work collectively if you could find people you could get on with, and if you could actually come to a point where you could define the project and so on. We're all very young and none of us had any experience in actually project management and delivery and that kind of thing, and neither really did Stuart or Michael. So there was actually – and in terms of just ordinary administration there was no administrative structure. There was a nice, nice lady in the office-

Kieran Connell: Joan.

John Ellis: Joan, yeah, we all loved Joan. Like anybody, she was absolutely swamped by the simple act of keeping the show going in relation to what passed for university administration then. You just wouldn't be able to do it now. You just wouldn't be able to sustain it.

Kieran Connell: That freedom in that time...

John Ellis: Yeah, there was a huge amount of freedom and there was no cost control, but I know that Stuart was really aware that the university had the operation in their sights all the way along.

Kieran Connell: That's something that was discussed within the Centre, freely, or was that more nudge nudge?

John Ellis: It was if you talked to Stuart personally he would say, and it was clear that him only being acting was a real problem and there was – because, really, it needed a Richard Hoggart, it needed somebody who was going to front up this thing and say, 'Well, they are smart young things, let them do it and see what happens. I personally don't agree with a lot that's going on there but I think it's really important and it's going to get somewhere.' And it needed somebody with his gravitas to do that. Stuart was too political committed to occupy that position. You look around the country then and who the bloody hell was there? Who was there? Would you be able to do it with Asa Briggs? But he was too much doing – he was too much of an active researcher to do that. You really needed somebody of a real intellectual liberality who would identify with what was then very new, that chip papers matter, well a list of one, he was Richard Hoggart, and he'd just gone.

Kieran Connell: Did you get an inkling about that?

John Ellis: I was after-

Kieran Connell: You were already gone by that point.

John Ellis: Yeah.

[0:32:48]

Kieran Connell: Just finally then I was going to ask about looking back, how would you describe the legacies of your time there personally but also leaving and the *Screen* stuff and all that, how would you describe the legacies of that moment?

John Ellis: Well, Ros and I are still together, that's the most important legacy. Who do I – do we have friends from that era? Kind of, don't see much of some. I see Colin Sparks a bit but then that's because he is washed up on the same shore as me really but now he's in Hong Kong, a bit further away.

Kieran Connell: I caught him actually whilst he was over.

John Ellis: You did. I have things to do with China and so on so... and he was at Westminster for a long time. So I do see some people from that period, really super marginal characters like Paul Leicester I'm still in touch with.

Kieran Connell: Oh really? That's interesting.

John Ellis: Paul is-

Kieran Connell: Is he still studying his loch ness monster?

John Ellis: Yes, loch ness monster. He is a working class Brummy and there he was – his credentials, in that sense, were better than anybody else's but that was the problem for him. He had left school as soon as he could and had gone to night school, and so he had done the classic Hoggartian route and there he was, he was local, but he was also a big character (inaudible 0:34:22). But then what would have done? But, intellectually, yes, it's the other thing in my life along with the *Screen* thing really and I've always been stuck between sociology and humanities, if you like, as a result; always been the person who deals in content for the people who deal in structure, the person who deals in structure for the people who deal in content.

Kieran Connell: Between camps, as it were.

John Ellis: Yes, between camps, and that's the offer I have in terms of doing it with television and the audio visual wider...

Kieran Connell: Do you get a sense that film studies and cultural studies have actually become closer in the last ten years or...?

John Ellis: Well, load of crap. Well, I mean, cultural studies is a successful project but has forgotten to do what successful projects do which is dissolve itself. The perspective is now there and you can see it's just routine.

Kieran Connell: It's won.

John Ellis: Yeah, it's a bloody big success, yeah, it's won. It's out there, in any number of intellectual disciplines, it's out there in reams and reams of cultural commentary, in journalism, on TV and so on, it's there in how people think. There is no longer the kind of questions that were being put to those people who started the cultural studies centre in the late 1960's, just unthinkable. The job is done, it has been won. So you don't anymore say there is something called cultural studies but there are people out there saying there's something called cultural studies, and quite often that is a very good way of doing very bad work. And so is film studies. In a different way, film studies has become intensely problematic, cultural studies because it's bad cultural studies, 'I read this in the newspaper,

isn't it interesting?' And bad film studies is, 'Here's my favourite film and here's what I think about it.' Bad cultural studies won't have much theory in it but bad film studies has to have the theoretical bit for the first 1500-2000 words of your 5000 word article. The big project, the thing that makes intellectual work, interesting and generally relevant is what's ebbed away from both those fields.

[0:37:30]

Kieran Connell: Which is the-

John Ellis: Which is why, for me, I pitch my camp slightly differently. I say my pitch is actually we're in the middle of a big change which is where sound and vision, the audio visual, is becoming as routine a form of communication as print, say. So print rather than just writing, a form of a product. And I think that's happening really fast in our society and changes the terms of communication. It changes the terms of how people relate to each other, how they present themselves, who they are as individuals, how you can conduct political discourse, how you can affect social change. It changes all the terms, and it's happening remarkably fast, because I never thought I would see this. I thought even fifteen years ago, wow, it's possible one day, but now I think it's bloody happening now. And we don't really know what it's all about, and all this stuff about how you put yourself out there, personal identities, stuff about privacy, about what information is legitimate for large corporations and the state to control and what's not, we don't know. We've only just realised that we can do it, and academics are actually in the forefront of saying we can do stuff with meta data. And we can do really interesting stuff with meta data, and marketing people are doing really interesting stuff with meta data, and it turns out the state is doing really interesting things with meta data as well, and we are less happy about that. That's it. It was a terrific project. It won. You are quite right, it won. The cultural studies centre was a failure for all the reasons that I've said but despite that it won.

Kieran Connell: Thank you very much for your time. Thanks.

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