

[0:00:00]

Kieran Connell: So, what I was going to ask first, Richard, was how difficult it was for you to leave History and join the Centre, and what were the reasons behind that transition?

Richard Johnson: Yes. Well I did enjoy teaching History, I enjoyed teaching Social History, because as you know at that time it was just really starting to take off, Social History and there is a lot of student demand for it. Already in History, you know like those waves of students were coming in, like feminists coming in and saying, "Why aren't you doing Gender History?" Things like that, so it was very stimulating and I enjoyed it a lot. Probably there are three or four different reasons for moving to, well applying because I didn't know I'd be successful, but applying to CCCS. I think one was the connection with the student movement. I'd been involved more or less as a kind of a sort of a staff follower of a student led movement. But, I was very committed to reforming the University and basically it was a demand for participation, more democratic organisation, a different relation between staff and students which I think we were already..., you know some of us were already practicing in our teaching. But, it really struck a cord for me and I did associate the student movement with the Centre, partly because people like Chas Critcher were very prominent, he was quite a prominent leader in '68, he was up on the platform with Dick Atkinson, this lecturer in Sociology with whom I was quite friendly.

Kieran Connell: Within the University, it had a reputation for being connected to that kind of, that student politics?

Richard Johnson: Yes, yes and of course that stayed with them ever since, you know it was a big liability in some ways. And Hoggart you see, Hoggart played a role in the occupation. He was a kind of liberal mediator between the students and the admin. Michael definitely was quite heavily involved and Stuart was fairly involved, certainly sympathetic, more than sympathetic. So, that was one thing. Then the other thing was this, this kind of very much earlier history of mine, when I was... my last year at school when I read *The Uses of Literacy* and went to Hunslet and tried to make a film and got into working class youth culture and then wanted to be an artist and go to Goldsmiths, got a place at Goldsmiths and then my dad wouldn't... he said, "You mustn't do that, you've got to go to Cambridge." I didn't have the courage then to make the break so there was a sort of unfinished business about... I think I did History at Cambridge because it was the only thing you could do that had a kind of..., I don't know whether Sociology was available. If it was I didn't know about it and History seemed to be the nearest you could do to a sort of social subject, I don't know quite how to describe it. In fact I enjoyed the political theory which was part of the history tripod. So, there's this unrequited relationship that's something like Cultural Studies. Which was kind of arty and engaged with the popular really, and of course History wasn't like that at Cambridge, it wasn't like that at all, there was no real social history component at all. So it wasn't a diversion. So then I get to Social History in Birmingham and then I read Thompson of course. I didn't read Thompson I think until I started teaching. I'm not sure about that, certainly after I'd done my thesis.

Kieran Connell: So when was that then, when did you arrive in Birmingham?

Richard Johnson: I arrived in '66 and I finished my thesis in '68, just before the occupation, well January of '68 I think. We did it over Christmas. I've lost my way there.

Kieran Connell: So you were always aware of...

Richard Johnson: That was the second reason. Also it was another funny coincidence; I did know Michael Green in Cambridge. Not very well, he was like a friend of a friend and we used to do like crazy things together, you know sort of goonish type things. So I kind of knew him a bit. Didn't have much contact with the Centre while I was in Social History because again when me and Peter Cain (?) who I got appointed with, we were so busy setting up our lectures and everything like you are when you start teaching. I did go to a few seminars in Richard Hoggart's day and couldn't really get an angle on it at all, couldn't... because I think he was very literary.

Kieran Connell: Were they being led by, at that point, Stuart...?

Richard Johnson

[0:05:33]

Richard Johnson: I think Stuart was there. What I remember was quite a literary, vague, fuzzy kind of thing that I couldn't make sense of. I think I must have known Stuart then, I think I said to him or wrote to him, it's not very clear in my mind, "Sorry, Stuart, but I don't think I'll come again, it's a bit over my head."

Kieran Connell: (Laughs) Ironic.

Richard Johnson: Something like that. So I didn't go back very much and I was pointed to link with the Historians in the Arts Faculty as I told you I think and, so my energies went linking the Historians with, well what was Social Science. Also being very interested in Sociology already and sociological theory and the Sociology Department was quite interesting at Birmingham. Charles Madge was there, one of the founders of Mass-Obs and there were some other interesting people actually. So, that was a formation but I only did History because it was the nearest thing I could do I think underlying it.

Kieran Connell: So did that, did you experience in Birmingham, in the History Department, Social History, did you still feel like it wasn't quite getting at what you really wanted to do intellectually?

Richard Johnson: I think so, I think so and this idea of the contemporary was quite... and then you see the student movement also politicised me, at least in the university politics. But, more broadly I think and I was also thinking myself the Marxist in History anyway, if not in Philosophy and everything. So, it just seemed very attractive at some point and it wasn't a repulsion in any way from what I was doing. Maybe it was getting slightly less exciting than it had been in the late '60s, early '70s (laughter). You know, you couldn't really sustain that.

Kieran Connell: So the job came up at, effectively Margaret left to go full time in Paris and...

Richard Johnson: Yes. No, that wasn't... go on anyway.

Kieran Connell: In the late '60s that would have been but then a few years later it got the funds to appoint a permanent lecturer...

Richard Johnson: That's right, yes.

Kieran Connell: ... to compliment Stuart who was the acting director and then become the permanent director.

Richard Johnson: And Michael who was part-timing with English, yeah.

Kieran Connell: Then you ultimately were successful.

Richard Johnson: Yes.

Kieran Connell: Do you have any recollections of that process?

Richard Johnson: Yes, I do remember it quite well. They were unsure whether to appoint an Anthropologist or Historian. The reason for the job, well the job spec I was given so to speak was to teach this MA course and this was a new venture and they were very dubious about it because you know, because you have a course and the way it had evolved so far in this participatory way.

Kieran Connell: So it would be a taught MA.

Richard Johnson: Taught MA. So I as, right from the beginning I was like the MA person, the only person appointed specifically for that job. Then the idea with Stuart was to carry on doing the theory because he was going to make the general theory seminar that already existed, the one that had dragged them through European Philosophy and all that, that some people didn't like (laughter). So, he was going to make that, they were going to make that into the theory because I wasn't involved in this initial planning, they were putting that into the theory course and then somebody was going to teach History or Anthropology or something more applied in a way, I think. I mean there are details

of who applied in the archive, but I know that I came out as the person they wanted to appoint and I think whether that was a History versus Anthropology thing or just personalities I really don't know. But, I got, somewhere in the back of my mind I got a sense of who was also applying.

[0:09:58]

Kieran Connell: Was it hard to accept..., I mean what was the reaction of your colleagues in History then when you decided...

Richard Johnson: Well that was very interesting, particularly my professor who was a man called John Harris then, advised me not to apply. He sort of said it would be academic death and, "You could do very well in History, Richard." My previous professor, WHB Court, Harry Court, who was a really nice man, died prematurely. He always said... well no the story actually is more moving than that. He died and really, you know shouldn't have died, I think it was probably medical errors. Because it was so sudden he left messages for all his friends and the message he left to me was, "Remember that scholarship is more important than Politics." No, it was, "You're doing very well, Richard, but remember that scholarship is more important than Politics." So, I mean he definitely wouldn't have approved of going to the CCCS, and I think colleagues thought it was a big mistake. I don't remember talking to Dorothy about it because she might have been quite ambivalent.

Kieran Connell: Did you ever have doubts before, like as it went through the process, as it was happening?

Richard Johnson: No, I think I was really very excited by it. I think obviously I had doubts when I got there because I was quite out of my depth for quite a while.

Kieran Connell: That's what I was going to ask you next, how would you summarise the atmosphere when you arrived and did that match with your hopes and expectations before arriving?

Richard Johnson: I have to dig into memory here; I remember that corridor on the top floor.

Kieran Connell: Which would have been...?

Richard Johnson: It's in the Arts Faculty.

Kieran Connell: The Arts, before that it would have been wouldn't it?

Richard Johnson: That's right, there was a library and I don't have a very clear memory of it but I think I remember finding it quite... Well I remember I definitely found it quite difficult because I was quite out of my depth and what, you know with the kind of theoretical discussion and, the cultural emphasis. I mean, discovering what they meant by culture. I can't remember whether I'd read Raymond Williams. I think I probably read things like *The Country and the City*, but probably not his theoretical stuff. I just can't remember whether I'd read any Gramsci, I think I might have encountered Gramsci but I hadn't done serious study, knew nothing about structuralism at all. So in a way, I was way behind the PhD people and all the other members of the Centre, as it was and particularly that generation that were working with Stuart on the sub-cultures and then the *Policing the Crisis*, everybody who was already in the Centre, say Angela McRobbie, they were way ahead of me, you know John Ellis, those people who were a little bit later just knew a lot more than I did. So, that was a bit of a problem and also a bit of a problem was that it wasn't at all clear whether a role for History was acceptable.

Kieran Connell: Because I mean, that's one of the things that I was keen to kind of explore with you and ask you about was, you know you were appointment... they clearly went for an historian, there was a clear desire to, amongst some people anyway to kind of incorporate History into the Culture Studies project but did you encounter, amongst other people like post-grad students, a resistance to that?

Richard Johnson: Yes there was but, the real problem... I mean, it was a real problem; it was a real intellectual problem really. What role would history have in a Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies? And, I don't think I had an idea of contemporary history in my head, which I do now, which would have

fitted. So, you do work on the contemporary but you work on it like a historian would, see what I mean?

Kieran Connell: Yeah.

[0:14:31]

Richard Johnson: But, it felt much more contradictory to me then and I had a lot of historical knowledge about the 19th Century (laughter), and about history of schooling and a lot of quite particular things like historians do, you know. And, I couldn't altogether see how I could bring them in. So the first thing I related to was this *Peculiarities of the English* debate, which is the first thing I wrote in the Centre I think about that. Then I link that to Barrington Moore because I encountered Barrington Moore in the discussions with the sociologists. So I wrote that piece as a way of trying to get a sense of what you could do historically in a Cultural Studies way. Perhaps it's not really a Cultural Studies piece, I don't think. Except, that it incidentally engages with the *New Left Review* and with Edward Thomsson, although I suppose it is historical. Anyway, that was the first attempt to do it. Then probably the second attempt to do it was working with Michael on that, the war radicalism piece which I still think's a really good, interesting piece actually, and I still quite often cite it. That was in the, we had a group called Cultural History.

Kieran Connell: Which was a sub-group.

Richard Johnson: Which was a sub-group.

Kieran Connell: Did you help to...? Did you set that up?

Richard Johnson: I don't think I set it up on my own. I think it was generally me and Michael working together with the historians, the more historically orientated people, Tom Jeffrey, Bill Schwarz particularly. Tom Jeffrey would be interesting to contact but he's a civil servant.

Kieran Connell: Right, quite high up I believe.

Richard Johnson: Yes, he is yes. Does it matter about the noise?

Kieran Connell: No, it's fine.

Richard Johnson: So, we started to try and do things but the real problem was that I had to teach the MA you see and we did what they called a dry run of the MA course. I suppose that was '74 was it? Anyway before it officially started you know, before it was on the University calendar. So we did a test run, and that was very conflictual because I started off teaching it like a historian would teach it really.

Kieran Connell: What does that mean?

Richard Johnson: Well it meant I did a sort of an expanded version of *Peculiarities of the English* but we did it, you know period by period, so looking more closely at the Thompson *New Left Review* arguments starting with the relation of the bourgeoisie and the peculiar formation of the bourgeoisie. I think that's what we did anyway; you probably better check it (laughter). I had that in my head anyway, and quite early on, very early on I think there was a rebellion really and a why the hell are we doing this, what's this for? How does this relate?

Kieran Connell: So that was a student rebellion, post-grad student rebellion.

Richard Johnson: Yes, it was the MA course and that would have included Bill, it would include Greg McLennan, I'm trying to think who else it would include, I'd need the lists.

Kieran Connell: But I mean, given that you talked about how difficult it was coming to the Centre and feeling like, as a lecturer but feeling behind some of the students, was that difficult to deal with, a student rebelling like that?

Richard Johnson: Yeah, well except they were the new ones of course, and even they were rebelling (laughter), let alone Angela and co. who were genuinely way ahead of me. So, it was a double thing then, and of course also feeling quite small in relation to Stuart and his knowledge and the way he could draw this fantastic map of the area. So yeah, I think the first year or two were quite difficult. But, you know then we found a solution and I think it was we, because I did work very closely with that generation who were starting the MA, we did work together. We devised this model of the MA where we started really with historiography and History and theory and what is History? I seriously started to read E.H Carr and things like this which I hadn't read in Cambridge, and I recovered my knowledge of Geoffrey Elton who taught me there, you know and used him as a kind of a... that is the sort of other side of the argument. So, I think it started to work so the first part was always that, as I remember it and the second part was the case study. The case study shifted around in period terms but we did quite a lot on the late 19th, early 20th Century. Partly because of this feminist and social revival, there was really interesting things happening in the run up to World War I. I'm a bit vague on that but I think we shifted around different case studies depending on the interests of the year.

Kieran Connell: You mentioned that you kind of worked closely with people like Bill, was that something that you experienced previous to that, that close relationship between staff members and students that in a sense, the students...?

Richard Johnson: No, theoretically I believed in it because it was '68. Apart from the supervision I didn't do any group work with post-grads... Oh yeah, of course we did the MA, Dorothy and I but I don't remember us thinking..., being very innovative in how we did it, you know the actual method, teaching method. I think I was kind of committed to a sort of informal or equality relation with students before I had a context in which to do it. Now I had it on a few post-graduate students in History, but never enough to make into a group. I don't think I ever thought of making them into a group. So, you know I obviously had quite good relationships with quite a few PhD students before that. Anyway, but we did start to work as a group and then we were in other groups you see, so some of us were in the Cultural History group working together, and some of us were in the Marx reading group if I remember it almost at the same time I think. I knew a bit of Marxism but I hadn't systematically read Marx before then.

Kieran Connell: What would you say were the benefits and downsides of that collaborative approach to the work?

Richard Johnson: Well I think if you're breaking open a new area or inventing an new area it was incredibly important and dynamic and when I was talking to the chap who interviewed me about interdisciplinarity, you know I said you could have hardly have done it without a method like that and people coming from English and Sociology and History and willing to see what was relevant in the new study and putting things together in that way. Michael and Stuart were quite literary, both of them. They both had literary backgrounds, Stuart converted to sort of social theorist and Michael just did everything (laughter), but I think there was quite a literary formation there and so it was also, I think almost a part of it was supporting people who came out of History and maybe some kinds of Social Science as well. Because, I really, really engaged very early again with Paul and the field work.

Kieran Connell: Paul Willis?

Richard Johnson: Yeah, well Andrew Thompson was also involved then and they had a field work group. I'm not sure Hazel wasn't in that.

Kieran Connell: Hazel Downing?

Richard Johnson: Downing.

Kieran Connell: I think Hazel was definitely in the Work group.

Richard Johnson: In the Work group, it was the Work group, that's what it was. So she was there as well. Not quite that early, I think maybe a little bit later, I get muddled up with times.

Kieran Connell: Yeah, I think Hazel was there sort of with people like Neil Grant in the late '70s.

Richard Johnson: Yeah, yes. Okay, so but that continued that group and I remained in it because I was very interested in... I felt an affinity, and still do actually, with ethnographic graphic method. And that was a place in the Centre was it was discussed. It was rather a minority interest I think, even though it produced some very good work.

[0:23.53]

Kieran Connell: One of the kind of mainstream narratives about the Centre is the embrace of the kind of continental philosophy, the theory with a big 'T', as someone who hadn't necessarily read Marx systematically like you say beforehand and from that background that you came from. Then on the one hand there's this philosophical continental on Marxism and such like, on the other hand there's this other kind of ethnography that people are doing in their own particular field, whether it's Paul doing it on why working class boys get working class jobs or Hazel doing it on receptionists, Dorothy doing it on housewives. I mean, what are your kind of reflections on how all that fitted together really or did it fit together? Maybe it didn't?

Richard Johnson: That's a good question actually (laughs). I don't know whether it did fit together. Certainly there was always a lot of plurality, much more than the dominant narrative suggests, there was always a lot of plurality. At one end there were the people, even at that time like Coward and Ellis who were really fascinated by the most advanced stuff coming from Paris, the Lacanianism and the post-structuralism, on the one hand. Then there was Paul and Dorothy (laughs) who were theoretical. Paul was in a way, quite a theoretical writer, he was kind of a cultural Marxist really. So I think that strand they tend to relate more to the Williams version of Cultural Studies and the everyday life and live culture type of definition.

Kieran Connell: Where would you situate yourself in relation to those?

Richard Johnson: Yeah, right in the middle of it all I think, always. Because, you know I still draw a lot on Marxism, I'm a complete addict, Gramsci addict. I do like to think about system and structure and so much discourse is highly individualistic or empiricist and doesn't grasp even the idea that there might be systematic forces at work in a situation. I'm fascinated by this language stuff and the post-structuralism (laughs) but also by Bakhtin and the Leningrad School which I discovered through that debate about language. Methodologically, I think if was doing research I would be doing... Actually I've done a lot of contemporary history, I suppose, that's what I've done. But, I'm very interested and have supervised loads of theses on ethnographic methods. I was quite critical of Williams in that phase but I'm now much more appreciative of what he did. Because, he was really quite a theoretical writer, as was EPT really, perhaps too much in a way.

Kieran Connell: I'm going to come on to EPT.

Richard Johnson: Anyway, but they were the influences, you know there was definitely, well Stuart laid it all out, the two paradigms, you know there definitely was a tension between those and individuals did orientate more to one than the other. Maybe that was a bit related to disciplinary background because for some reason there was a strong strand in the literary that did relate to the theory and a strong strand in the historical and the...

Kieran Connell: Maybe one way of kind of getting to this question is to actually talk a little bit about the kind of everyday life at the Centre and how people group themselves up into those kind of satellite sub-groups that people co-founded like with you and Michael doing the Cultural History one or maybe Paul Gilroy doing the Race one, and the Marxist group that I know Greg and Bill were wrapped up in. So they were all the... then ethnographic stuff, the Work group. It seems like from the archive anyway they seemed like the satellite groups and the core of life at the Centre seemed to be... the things that everyone took part in seemed to be the kind of general theory seminar, the Centre general meeting where they did more of an administration side of things and of course the end of year presentations where people who were in these sub-groups came back and said, "This is what we got up to." I mean is that roughly how it was?

Richard Johnson: I would say that's a fair summary I think, yeah. Though you had to put the MA in that because the general theories seminar ceases to be called that and it becomes the MA theory course. But, everybody in their first year, whether they're doing an MA or not, attends that, in fact I think they attended both, I'm not sure but they certainly had to attend the theory course. It was strongly recommended because that laid out the field. So, you're right about the other elements.

[0:29:35]

Kieran Connell: How do they all relate to each other then? How did they kind of fit in with it in terms of the theory seminar and what people were doing in the sub-groups?

Richard Johnson: Again I think it was very pluralistic I think. I mean there's not straightforward derivation of the sub-group interests from the theory. I suppose there was some notion of doing culture (laughter). It's a really interesting question. I just think it was very much more pluralistic and it genuinely depended on student initiatives. So because it's not top down organised it's hard to see what the coherence was, I mean it wasn't you must have these groups. I mean there always were certain groups that always carried on and had all the problems of reproducing themselves with the new generation, so there was always media right until the end. For a long time there was education, as soon as the women's movement started to impact, which I think in a group way was a little bit after I arrived, because there were feminists, you know active feminists when I arrived, including Cath Hall who was hovering around the Centre at that time and certainly Ros Coward. Certainly there were a number of people, women who would regard themselves as feminists but there wasn't a group. But, as soon as there was then that either a Women's Studies group initially, then it became a kind of gender group, like you know in general that happened, that was the trajectory and that was a fairly permanent thing after that. There nearly always was some group that was concerned with ethnography. You'll be able to check on all this and you'll be able to actually see what did persist, but this is my impression, that there were certain strands that were nearly always there. Then there was a kind of a lot of groups that came and went and very much according to enthusiasms and sometimes according to, I think according to... I don't want the word opposition, I don't want the word resistance, I want (overspeaking) dissatisfaction. So, you know for example the people who are really interested in post-structuralism set up a group on language at one point and that became a group which was very, much into theories of language. Another area which kind of, was sort of pretty permanent I suppose was literature, so re-doing literature in a different way and Michael, for a while I know Michael got a bit disillusioned with that and just got fed up with being put in a literary pigeon hole, you know but for quite a while he..., and Tony Davis of course who was popping over, was interested in that.

Kieran Connell: What was the significance of the staff members then in relation to... because I mean from talking to people and you mentioned it yourself like students, a lot of the impetus came from the bottom up in the sense that some groups were formed...

Richard Johnson: Yes it generally did.

Kieran Connell: ... you know according to people's own interest and students' own interests. A lot of the students I've spoken to, what comes out very strongly is that they felt they had an ownership over the project, the Centre's project. So, what I was going to ask you was what do you think as a lecturer at the Centre what was the importance of your role personally but also of Stuart and Michael's and then later Maureen's in relation to that grass roots activity?

Richard Johnson: Well again I think it was in a way quite problematic. I think, I've talked to you before about you could be very committed to the form of organisation. I was and I remain committed right till the end actually, very committed to it right..., really you know in the late '80s wanted to keep as much of that as we could, but there is a still a problem about how you operate as a teacher in that context. So, I think, well different ways of describing it. One is, what I would call a kind of sweeper role that if something didn't happen then you made sure it happened. So you had a responsibility to realise a project. So you know, one lot of students might come in and start it off and then they might drift away, people need to get a job and all that sort of thing happens of course. Or, people's priority shifts goes to thesis or whatever, things happen in peoples lives. But, I think the permanent staff

were there to make sure that the project got finished. A lot of projects started in that very creative period in the late '70s, well mid to late '70s I guess, that had to be realised in the '80s. That was one of the main ways I saw my job. Similarly if things weren't getting written then you wrote them. If it wasn't getting done, you did it (laughter), you know. I didn't think really in the first part, I was so busy learning I don't know that I directed intellectually very much, except I tried to put History more on the agenda, or historical approaches more on the agenda. By the mid '80s and certainly and even better the late '80s, when I was, I wasn't director then actually but I was teaching the theory. I felt I was really introducing people to the field and doing reasonably successfully. The theory units and the identity course I taught in the MA course from about, well struggling in the mid '80s but getting there I think in the late '80s. And then being really... it really working in the '90s, up to '93. Then I think I did have a more, a directing role in the sense of where the thing was going.

[0:36:47]

Kieran Connell: Was that a more conventional role would you say?

Richard Johnson: No, I don't think so. It was more like the role that Stuart had in the old theory seminar and kind of mapping the field, showing the issues and problems and all that. But, not being particularly prescriptive about what people ended up studying. I think that might have been the strength of it really. So people got a kind of a map but there was no prescription about what you studied. And, that's probably why it worked as well as it did. You know, I mean I've got a lot to say about the fact that it was impossible anyway, but it did... insofar as it worked then it worked because there was this combination of a frame, you know it sort of held people to some extent within which you could work, but, then enormous plurality and possibility of initiative within that.

Kieran Connell: What about your relationships with other staff members, I mean Stuart comes out as being really, in the interviews that I've done anyway, as being obviously a crucial figure and Michael also in another way.

Richard Johnson: Yes, in a much less obvious way.

Kieran Connell: Yeah, what was your kind of...what are your reflections on those relationships between the teachers if you like?

Richard Johnson: Well, let's start with simple things (laughter). We kind of met, we did meet. You know the Centre general meetings meant to take all the decisions, there were staff meetings and I think actually there had to be to keep things running. I always remember Michael as the one who made things happen, made the routine work, you know, made it tick over and Stuart was the inspirer, definitely. Took me quite a long time to get..., in fact I've only really recently got the confidence to treat Stuart as an equal. So, I suppose that was an inhibition. I think he was... Well he worked really closely with some students, really closely and a lot of affection and real group identity around that sub-culture. But, more widely I think he was rather held in awe and those of us, including myself who hadn't broken through to friendship if you see what I mean, I think he was quite an awe inspiring figure. After he'd left we used to talk about the ghost that haunted the eighth floor, that it was Stuart walking up and down. That he was still there even though he wasn't. So, I don't feel like that... well we had a really meeting together and it sort of finally broke through that I think, but it took a long time. Then he went, so we never knew what he thought of us, were we doing alright or were we, you know (laughter). I know Michael felt quite similarly about that. Maybe Maureen didn't care so much and it wasn't so important for her.

Kieran Connell: Well because Maureen had come after he'd already left.

Richard Johnson: She came after, yes she replaced him.

Kieran Connell: Which brings its own set of difficulties I imagine.

Richard Johnson: For her, yes for her. But, you know the big... she also came in on a big impulse which was the feminist push, insurgency as I call it which, women surged into spaces...

Kieran Connell: Is that how you saw it then, as an insurgency?

Richard Johnson: Yes but you know, well that's the word I've used since in writing about what happened in the academy and in the professions. Because, it wasn't a revolution, it was an insurgency you know, people actually moved into spaces, women moved into spaces where they hadn't been in large numbers before. That happened in the Centre but it happened actually because the women there were already organised to make it happen. So as far as Maureen was concerned she came in on that wave. So what would have helped, I can't really speak for her, but I think what she got strength from was the fact that she did have that political commitment among the students, among the women, not all of the women but most of the women. That must have been a big... she was very committed, is very committed and such a hard working person. So I think, I don't know about Michael, I never quite... because I was talking to Maureen about..., in the commemoration thing, when Michael died and saying, "I thought you, Maureen, broke through into real friendship with Michael and I never did." I don't think I did anyway, not hostile, occasional rivalries I think, possibly.

[0:42:23]

Kieran Connell: In relation to...?

Richard Johnson: Possibly in relation to students, I don't know. I mean I did sometimes think that some students gravitated to Michael and some students gravitated to me. I don't think that was ever a serious problem, we didn't have serious rows. I think the only time he really, really disapproved of me was when I had the relationship with Mariette and then he called me in just like headmaster (laughter). You know, understandably probably. Anyway, I think the relationship, certainly me, Michael and Maureen we worked together very closely and we met very often and we puzzled over problems and we always had a slightly different angle on things and it was a productive trio I think. There was no hierarchy.

Kieran Connell: People have described it as a...students that I've spoken to as well have described the Centre, at different points anyway as being a collective and, there was that commitment. I don't know how much that changed anyway as things went... as things progressed, particularly in the early stages. I mean the Centre general weekly meetings; I mean do you have any memories of those? I mean is that where things did get decided? People...to a point?

Richard Johnson: Yes I think they were quite difficult from a staff point of view because you always wondered whether demands were coming up that you would never be able to realise and, you know you'll have picked it up from the archive, there were some big rows. I think I invented the idea of priorities of the year, almost as a way to try and, it's a little bit later, I don't think it's a mid '70s thing.

Kieran Connell: On contradictions?

Richard Johnson: On contradictions.

Kieran Connell: Does that fit in with that?

Richard Johnson: That was still Stuart wasn't it?

Kieran Connell: Late '70s, it was.

Richard Johnson: Yeah, late '70s. That was definitely, I can't remember the details but definitely the product of a big row.

Kieran Connell: It comes through in the archive a little bit. (Laughter), just because it is, there was a lot of different papers written, I think from the priorities for the year document that someone had written at some point, then there were numerous documents in relation to that about the kind of direction the Centre should be going in. I just wondered as a general thing does that kind of fit with your recollections of the general meetings whereby decisions were made as a collective?

Richard Johnson: Yes I think the decisions were made but they were always qualified by what was possible within the University and I suppose we always had the last word in a way because depending on

whether, it wasn't purely internal, depending on what we decided it happened or it didn't happen. Except, you know there was this area... you can see how students could think that it was more self governing because in the areas that mattered to the student, what you studied and how there was a genuine openness and democracy and room for initiative and change. You know the feminist thing was only the first really of a whole series of insurgencies, perhaps not quite so complete as the feminist one but the Race and Politics group was a political project in relation to the Centre apart from anything else. And, other people had political projects; you know Ros and John wanted us all to look at psychoanalysis and post-structuralists. So, it was possible for people to... for students to get together and say, "Right we're going to push it this way." So in that sense that was real.

[0:46:20]

Kieran Connell: As a, I guess in some senses, as a staff member you could be held up as being a figure of authority. I mean would you and your colleagues become kind of targets for the different insurgencies, whichever way... as a white, male...?

Richard Johnson: Yes, I think so. I think so, definitely we did definitely. Well, after Stuart left we did in relation to race and before Maureen came we did in relation to gender. And that, you know I think that was... I mean I think they had different relations to feminism and found it more or less easy. I mean it's no secret that Stuart found it difficult because he said so publicly. He found that very, very difficult and I don't think it was the only thing that made him leave but it was one of the things. What he said to me was that he found it increasingly difficult to be creative and that's why he went, you know. He said practically those things so I don't think this is confidential.

Kieran Connell: How did you find it?

Richard Johnson: You'd have to go into whole personal history here which I'm quite happy to do. But, I didn't find it as difficult as some men might have found it. Oh gosh, well it goes back a long way, it goes back being brought up in a largely female household, admiring my sister who's five years older than me and was the one that bought me *The Uses of Literacy* and went to university and had a relationship with Roy Hattersley and then went Catholic and went to Italy, damn it. But, I admired her hugely so I had an early woman, intellectual and artistic; she painted and wrote as well, model, a sister. So, and then I was sent away to school, to an all boys boarding school by an ambitious father who we didn't see that much you know, because he was busy at work, all that classic bourgeois pattern and hated it, mostly, though did quite well, I was quite a good school boy. Tried to make this break at the end of... that involved being an artist and doing something different but, I was never comfortable in all male institutions and there's definitely a sort of orientation towards feminine or... It's very hard to describe, I don't think I'm an effeminate man exactly, but I'm a kind of pro-woman man or something. And, so there's that sort of formation in me, sort of formation. I always find it very easy to teach women students, sometimes I fell in love with them but it was more a professional thing, you know.

There was a gender thing going on in that way but I just found it very easy to teach women students and men too, but it wasn't easy for a lot of men academics to respond to the women, the increasing numbers of women coming in as students. So I think encountering feminism wasn't so difficult as it was for some men and I didn't, at some level I didn't find it so difficult. The thing that I found most difficult was the tension between learning about feminism and learning to work with women who were feminists in the academy on the one hand, and reconstructing my relationship at home in the domestic on the other. That for me was the real difficulty. So to square the way I was living at home, my relationship with Jill and the children with this obsession, pre-occupation let's be kinder, pre-occupation, very pre-occupying job which you thought, you know was so important. So it was, and was feminist, do you see what I mean? So you had the contradiction of a feminist influenced academic work and actually what was a pre-feminist marriage where Jill and I were fighting over all the classic issues, how much was I there, how much did I look after the children, how much did I do the cooking, how much did I do the housework, why couldn't she go back to work. She wasn't at all militant, but you know in a way she didn't have to be because I was getting more conscious I knew this inequality existed and it was, that was all very difficult.

Kieran Connell: So in a sense, the spheres that traditionally in the old analysis separated for you became the kind of... but the public sphere in your work, the changes that you were going through there came into the domestic sphere as well.

Richard Johnson: That's right, fed back into it and like Jill wasn't, well actually she was, she was clever but she wasn't sort of academically clever. You know, she wasn't an... And she set out then to, she then went and did an Open University course, she was a trained teacher; she was a very, very good at teacher. So it was difficult... in a way I was quite isolated at home because it was difficult to bring these often feminist ideas or anyway certainly radical ideas, into the home context in a way that would be creative there. It was just 'what he did at work', you know and it took me away from them. So it is pretty classic formation actually and the only solution I could find, apart from the fact, well I was pushed by being exhausted but I was also pulled by thinking I would never solve this problem if I worked full time which is why I went part time first and then left because there was no way I could solve this problem, having this level of commitment in the work space. I was writing so much at the time, you know writing when I should have been with the kids. There were holidays when they went off on their own and I didn't go with them. Stayed at home and wrote books. So the sacrifices are felt at the level of the domestic quite severely I think, probably... I don't know I can't talk for Michael or Stuart but I know, I mean I do know Maureen made very big sacrifices. She talked to me about it. It was very clear, she made it very clear that it was affecting her life in quite dramatic ways not having a partner, not having children, it wasn't compatible.

[0:54:29]

Kieran Connell: I mean that kind of best fits into what we were talking about earlier actually about how you define the nature of the intellectual work that you were doing at the Centre and, the commitment to that work, the political commitment to that work. Did you see the intellectual work that you were doing or did others see the intellectual work that they were doing as also a political enterprise?

Richard Johnson: Definitely yes.

Kieran Connell: At the same time.

Richard Johnson: Yes, definitely, definitely. No question that I thought it was political. Partly because then it fitted into the version of politics that I'd grown up into, into students politics. So, being a sort of follower of students was my politics in a way, and it was the form of identifying with the underdog. You know, like you identified against the staff and the bureaucracy and the administration and you identified with the students. I've done that all my academic life, I've not stopped doing that.

Kieran Connell: But, of course there wasn't a singular... the students didn't have a singular politics did they? I mean you've discussed feminism but then of course race happened, but also the class politics, the various strands of Marxist politics, Big Flame, IMG. How did you kind of navigate that?

Richard Johnson: I really like Big Flame but I had rows with SWP people. I mean I should say that I used to get quite angry (laughter), I don't know whether other people remember this or it's something they remember about me, but I do remember getting quite angry in conflicts. I used to get angry and sort of blow up and then regret it and then come back to the negotiating table so to speak... repeated pattern. That must have happened quite a lot because definitely I recognise it as a modus operandi, you know, that I did that. Not deliberately but... I think sort of political dogmatism tended to make me do that, lose my temper. And also being attacked, because we were attacked quite a lot and somehow you convert fear into anger, it's a kind of masculine thing. But, that... you know often the challenges that I found most hurtful were the ones that were about pedagogy and about how we were teaching in the curriculum. Those, right from that first encounter in the MA and then later ones which were all very creative actually, very good challenges for people with a lot of educational experience were coming and saying we don't know how to teach, which is perfectly true because, we were like all academics are, still very content oriented. It's what you know rather than how you teach whereas these educationalists would come in, two from Australia particularly. But, a lot of people, adult educators, a lot of students had very good educational backgrounds and could be very critical of the way we talked.

Kieran Connell: Which was hurtful because that's what probably, you said that's one of the parts that you really, really enjoyed the most and so you were trying to take their side.

Richard Johnson: Yeah, yeah so it was very difficult being positioned like that. It was very difficult being positioned, obviously as white and not sensitive to the race issues as we were. I don't even know explicitly but we were in our heads, placed like that by the Race and Politics group and later, this is the '90s by a group of black women who were in the Centre all at the same time and who really put us through it, particularly over a new appointment, the one that Les Back got in the end. But, that was a very fierce battle and that included Maureen too, Maureen was... you know because we were white and we were... And, that group was quite strongly militant actually, even more than Paul Gilroy and co. I think. It's interesting that Paul and Errol, I don't really know what happened to Errol, I really would like to know.

[0:59:16]

Kieran Connell: I interviewed him the other day.

Richard Johnson: Did you? You did, good.

Kieran Connell: He works in adult education.

Richard Johnson: Oh good, good. Interesting because I always rather liked Errol and I thought the work he did was very interesting too actually.

Kieran Connell: I was going to ask, I mean are you alright to carry on or do you want to have a break?

Richard Johnson: No, I'm alright. How long have we been going on for?

Kieran Connell: It's three o'clock now.

Richard Johnson: My absolute limit would be four o'clock.

Kieran Connell: Okay, I was going to ask you, what I wanted to do was just kind of ask a bit about post Stuart and then the transformation to the department in a bit. But, before I do that I wanted to ask about your... you know as you arrived at the Centre and developed this kind of introduced History if you like and developed your own work, your own kind of History work in relation to the debates around culturalism and I wanted to ask about your relationship within the Centre in terms of introducing History which you touched upon a bit and some people were saying, "Well what are you doing this for?" There was some resistance I think within the Centre but also about, I wanted to ask you about your work then in relation to History outside the centre and historians like Dorothy and Edward. Was there a growing hostility..., did you feel a hostility towards you and your practice in the late '70s?

Richard Johnson: Within the Centre?

Kieran Connell: Within and without.

Richard Johnson: Are you talking about the history in theory interests or...?

Kieran Connell: Yeah, I'm talking about your work, your Cultural History work, the Cultural History sub-group that you were doing. Then, in particular I wanted to ask basically into your correspondence with Thompson and the paper you gave the BSA in '78 and then the History Workshop and then you sent that to Edward, and then I think there was a paper that you got published in the History Workshop in late '78 or maybe '79. Then of course the Ruskin debate at the end of the '79. So, basically I was wanting to ask you for your reflections on your work, your intellectual practice in developing this Cultural History approach and the hostility that you went on to receive from people like Edward.

Richard Johnson: Okay, it's a bit difficult because it depends what you mean by the History work because I think I was doing a lot of different kinds of History work and so one strand would be recognisable by the historians like a cultural history project and supervising people like Frank Morton, Lucy Bland who

were doing real History. Another strand would be, what I thought, what I've come to think, probably didn't quite think of it then, as contemporary History in the way that *Policing the Crisis* is, but we were doing it about other things about things like education, so that strand. There are four strands actually. Then, the third strand is the History in Theory which is quite closely related to historiography as you know, so that same group... These are different groups too to a large extent. So, that same group was reading the Labour Historians, reading the Annales School as well as looking at Marxist history. So we had a phase where we were reading the historians, oh and the French Revolution, Marxist... you know [Albert] Soboul and people. In a way the engagement with the Marxist historians was only part of that, but that's historiographical, but linked to that was... I think Bill was interested most in the historiographical and I was interested in that and David Sutton was interested in that. But, Greg was particularly interested in the more philosophical if you like, the theory of history thing. So we'd sort of come together around that and it was a very nice group actually, I think it was rather male but we did really bounce off each other quite a bit. But, at the same time worked together a lot, we were a bit unpopular in the Centre because we were seen as a bit... this project I should say, not we, but this project was seen as a bit elitist; you know it occupied this space of high theory. It didn't only occupy that space.

So that's the third thing and then the fourth thing is the popular memory which is partly a break out of that by another group of people, including Mariette and Rebecca O'Rourke and Graham Dawson, another group of people who were actually quite critical of the previous History in Theory people unrelated to History Workshop in a different way through the memory work line and of course influenced Raphael quite a lot, we did actually influence Raphael a lot. He acknowledged that because we gave a paper there and we were writing about popular memories. We did have an influence on... that project had an influence too. So that's why I was confused when you said my historical work because there are at least four things and that's to leave out any work I might have done on the 19th Century social history line which I did a bit still. So, but you're interested in the historiographical and the Marxist history bit.

[1:05:13]

Kieran Connell: Yeah, in particular but I mean you mentioned popular memory anyway, that's another one thing on my long list of questions because I know that there was a kind of an issue there with popular memory and the book. But, in particular I was interested in your interpretation of your work to try and look at Thompson and look at... Notwithstanding the complexities or strands as you've outlined it, look at the work that you were doing post leaving Social History and joining the Centre and the attempts you made to reach out to Edward. I mean in the archive you're very, very... you know you're clearly quite wary of what he's going to say but also extremely respectful and hoping that he's going to acknowledge...

Richard Johnson: Yeah, we can have...

Kieran Connell: (Overspeaking 1:06:01), and I just wondered if..., for your reflections really of that kind of dialogue that ended up in '79 Ruskin.

Richard Johnson: Well, just how it got there first is perhaps quite useful. So he's the key figure for me when I start to teach Social History, no question. Then it's the friendship with Dorothy and I used to go to their house and I was definitely a... certainly a friend of Dorothy's and perhaps a disciple of Edward, perhaps. So, then I encountered this very different intellectual milieu which is very different because it's not, although there is a kind of theoretical underpinning to Edward's work it's not that explicit, well excepting that little preface to *Making [The Making of the English Working Class]*. So, I suppose it's that juxtaposition that sparks it off and I think it may have sparked it off the other people in the Centre, you know History is a very empiricist discipline basically with a very strong identity as that too. So, it was very intriguing to encounter this very different kind of way of thinking really which was best represented by Stuart I guess. But then, you know also found it in Greg in a different philosophical way and Bill's deep fascination in the history of History because he really, really wanted to know about how do these Marxist historians get to write in the way they did, what was the connection with the Communist Party etc. Then, with Edward as the key, he would never, he never recognised it even let alone acknowledged it that he was one of the founding influences of Cultural Studies. He refused the word cultural...

Kieran Connell: On all those earlier annual reports.

Richard Johnson: Yeah, yeah. He never really acknowledged his affect on the later generation. He didn't like the students' movement. Anyway that's, so anyway so it was heavily over determined really that we would study Edward in the end (laughter). Greg did a lot of work on... I don't know whether you've read his stuff on Thompson but, it's a slightly different take and very good. Bill is also writing about it in a different way. I don't remember how the dynamic came about but I think it was probably my initiative that we should publish something. We did a paper first; we did The Culture Economy and something else. We did a stencilled paper didn't we?

[1:09:04]

Kieran Connell: Yeah.

Richard Johnson: Well you know the history then. So, I certainly was very scared about it, which is why... well also in principle if you criticise somebody you should send your work to them first. So, that's what I did. I think, well you know I was discussing it also with Stuart and we were trying to work out... I was trying to persuade him, I was trying to persuade Edward to shift his position, there was no question because it seemed to me so difficult to understand why he'd make this issue so politically significant and it kind of annoyed me that he would. It annoyed me that he was so absolutist, I mean I'd still use that word about... You know it's different from being critical. I was quite critical of Althusser, we were all quite critical of Althusser. We thought it was very static, there were some interesting ideas, you know the formalism was quite intoxicating because of the empiricism of British academic culture. So you know, it was just a very exciting thing to encounter, it didn't mean you agreed with it. I couldn't understand I think, so I remember thinking, I'll persist with this; I'll carry on with this. I'm scared stiff of him because I know that people who argue with them are then seen as traitors, because I've seen it happen to other people and I've been in their sitting room in... while they discuss this or that person who is no good now. I could see it coming; I really could see it coming. I think it probably comes out of archive as well. I showed this stuff to Stuart, I wrote it in the letters even I think and I think there's one little note from him saying, "You may have shifted a bit but not very much." Or something like that. Then you see behind all this is the history of him... of Stuart and Edward.

Kieran Connell: Which comes out again in some of the letters that Edward's writing back to you.

Richard Johnson: So you know the whole thing is loaded in ways I didn't understand then. I wasn't very careful I think, you know in the actual publication. I think I was okay in insulting him and thinking about it and trying to argue it out privately. But, I think the actual piece that I published in the History Workshop wasn't very... I don't like it very much now. I think the arguments are alright but there's some elements... and then you see, now that was the most tremendous row before ever he got to the workshop because most of the editorial board didn't want to publish it. Then they seemed to decide, "Okay we'll publish it and then we'll organise a major riposte."

Kieran Connell: Was your motivation behind it to convince Edward as a new... I mean was it partly generational in the sense that you were a new generation, a younger generation and you were trying to kind of prove your worth in relation to the old guard?

Richard Johnson: Yeah, it's difficult isn't it to unscramble your motivations because you see people trying to make their reputations and criticising established figures all the time in the academy. I don't think that's what I was doing, I've not ever been really very careerist as an academic. I suppose I'm ambitious but not ambitious in that particular kind of way otherwise I'd have stayed with History and become a History professor. So, I think... no you see this is the funny thing, I don't think I saw a great political staking either because then by the time we got to the History Workshop and the big event, my overwhelming feeling was this has been blown up out of all proportion. You know, what the hell is this about? It then did become about something afterwards. I realised that what it was about was actually the ways that you conducted these debates.

Kieran Connell: The Polemic and...?

Richard Johnson: Yes, yes.

Kieran Connell: The way you attack and smash opposition?

Richard Johnson: Yes, that's it. And, a kind of Leninist inheritance really that was a problem politically as well, is a problem. Well it's recurrent but actually we've moved a long way in that respect, there's a lot more respect you know, within movement politics than there used to be. So that became politically significant in that way and some of the feedback I got afterwards, some of the friendlier feedback was on those lines, particularly from women again.

[1:14:43]

Kieran Connell: What was your kind of... from the write ups you read and that again sounded quite extraordinarily heated, extraordinarily tense, I mean personally or professionally what was your state of mind after that? I mean how did you...? It seemed like '79 was also the period when Stuart was about to leave.

Richard Johnson: Yes, definitely a crisis time but, not quite the big crisis time. Yeah it was the time when we were trying to decide who would be Director, failed to get it established as a post and it seemed the only thing to do was for me to be Director and it really wasn't... it was probably a mistake in career terms again. I was too young, too inexperienced and too insecure to head up a really... Centre like that. I could do it now, just about (laughs). I know I could do it, I could do it now but then I didn't know, I hadn't a clue. And anyway, we didn't think in those terms, we thought still in terms of the collective of three. Becoming Director was... anyway yes, sorry I got diverted. All that was going on more or less at the same time. So, yeah that was... but you know it was all difficult, I can't... it was all difficult (laughs). I suppose the best, easiest time was after I got established a bit a year or two into it and Stuart was still there and it was... I realised when he went how delicious it was working with him or under him if you like. It was under him, but within the frame that he established and those were really good days actually for me as well as I know for a lot of students, whereas it became so much more of a struggle in the '80s.

Kieran Connell: Yeah, that's one of the things I wanted to kind of... I'm conscious of time so I don't want to go on for too long but obviously one of the key issues is the relationship between the Centre and the University. When Stuart was there did you get the sense that he took on a lot of that himself and that's something you then had to then, when he left and you became director, did you then end up taking on a lot of that and...?

Richard Johnson: Yes, but again I'd stress that we always did it together, we really did do that side together and Michael was always at least as important, you know because actually he knew more people in the University. He had very good contacts and he was extremely good person at going round talking to people. And so, well I did find it a burden but it was a funny sort of burden because it wasn't like a traditional head of department, nothing like. I think actually I saw my main job as trying to keep something like the original conception or the way it had developed going in difficult circumstances, and keeping as much of that collective model as we could. I did hold on to it right till the end in the MA because that was the only bit that was left. So, you know the MA right through till the '90s was still, the bits I did particularly anyway and I think probably Michael and Maureen too, you know tried to keep that ethos still there.

Kieran Connell: Did that change when you became... when it became a department?

Richard Johnson: When it became a department there was a fresh set of problems and issues. There was the secular tendency to lose autonomy which was happening to everybody and affected us very badly. So we were more and more inspected and threatened with reorganisation and all that. So that was going on, but then in addition we had these two new staff members, Jorge and John Gabriel who, well they knew rumours of what the Centre did but they weren't committed to that model. So there's a real question about whether it could be preserved at all. There's a paper I wrote at the time which I did read again when I did the archive, which I think is quite a significant paper...

Kieran Connell: The one you scored on 'this is a crucial document'?

Richard Johnson: Yes, it's retrospective as well as an attempt to keep that going and it was the thing that convinced me when I read it, you know when I went through the papers that I had kept sort of faith with the conception as long as possible. So if I feel pride about CCCS it is that I really did persist in trying to keep that idea alive which is why the archive is... you know why I relate quite positively to the archive project obviously. I shared that with Stuart and it's one of the reasons why we had such a good meeting that last meeting we had that, you know we both agreed it had been really important to do and we were both inside it as it were still.

[1:20:26]

Kieran Connell: Is there a sense that by the '80s and then into the '90s the structures within higher education were changing to the point where it was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain, you were fighting that battle but the powers were becoming increasingly more difficult to fight against within the higher education institutions.

Richard Johnson: Yeah and not only, you know it wasn't only hostile administration, which had always been hostile since '68 to the Centre but also as you say the whole political scene is shifting and it's lost a space in universities, completely systematic and I wasn't at Birmingham, you know when it all comes in, in it's full blown neo-Liberal... I don't know, I was at Nottingham Trent. But I think it became increasingly difficult after. It was pretty difficult by the early '90s certainly. I mean for one thing you had to finish your PhD in four years, maximum. That meant you'd just got to get your head down and do the damn thing. So you could only do what I did at Nottingham Trent, get people together who were doing thesis and share problems. But, the thesis then had to be the focus rather than some other project. Of course that's a fundamental shift isn't it, because you know the Bill Schwarz's of this world etc were doing... or Ros Coward's were writing books.

Kieran Connell: Was there a sense that the political determination, the urgency, political urgency... that moment in the '70s and into the '80s, what comes out of the archive from the interviews that I've been doing is that there's a real sense of political urgency within... You know I think that comes to a head in a sense, that debate on Ruskin, it seemed like, especially Edward's letters anyway, that intellectual practice was seen as a really politically crucial thing from Edward's letters but also from the way you talked about the work at the Centre as well. Is there a sense that as the '80s progressed do you feel that some of that urgency kind of began to recede in the kind of intake, the student intake or was it still there?

Richard Johnson: That's really interesting, no I don't think so. I think because we got a very, very selective group of people, we did get people who were fairly politically committed. I'm trying to think you see, did we get people who came, who were coming to the Centre entirely out of a sort of an academic ambition, because that would be the other side of it wouldn't it. They knew the Centre was an important place; it had done this stuff, careerist mode. There may have been some people coming from overseas perhaps who came a bit like that. There was one year where it split, the MA group split very much along those lines with intellectually very ambitious people from mainly Europe on the one side and home bred part time students on the other who felt themselves very subordinated. But, it's not my... I can think of some good activists in the '90s.

Kieran Connell: There was a second wave of feminists wasn't there, people like Jackie Stacey came and did *Off Centre*...the kind of follow up to *Women Take Issue*, that was sort of mid to late '80s wasn't it?

Richard Johnson: Yes and I don't know when the family school group... there was a very interesting group around the family school group which is my first time I worked in a collective project with feminists, you know actually with the men/women thing. It was very productive and you know the people like Debbie Epstein who's very political, anti-racist, feminist, education reformer you know, ends up a psychoanalyst (laughs). So I don't think I see that happening actually but it might have happened after '93. You know again I can think of a very, very good American activist came and studied and really gained from the course, went back into activism. The Australians were very good, they were very political, (inaudible 1:25:34) Educational Studies in Australia, Adelaide. There were some very

good people coming, committed, Rosina Mart (?) you know, who was a black woman who stirred everything up, South African living in Canada, now back in South Africa, gender, race, sexuality very, very good politically.

Kieran Connell: So you maintained the kind of...

Richard Johnson: I think so; a lot of very political people came.

Kieran Connell: Just kind of towards the end then, one of the criticisms that Thompson made of the Centre, not of you personally but of the Centre's practice was that you've described it as being in these letters as inward looking, you didn't use the phrase naval gazing but in this paper, position paper that you kind of wrote the night before Ruskin apparently he talked about the need to kind of relate things back to the political struggle, I mean that he thought as being important in his view, I think. But, do you think the Centre was inward looking? I mean to what extent do you think it was, did you reach out to people outside of universities and external speakers coming in and that kind of thing?

[1.26.51]

Richard Johnson: Well, yeah for an academic department I wouldn't have called it inward looking, it was very intense so a lot of the energy did go into sorting out internal things. But, it was always, the work was always related to the outside if you know what I mean. Not so much the momentum of discipline, it was more the momentum of the contemporary, you know. So I don't think that's altogether fair. I think Stuart sometimes warned against inward lookingness as in the sense of being absorbed in very domestic quarrel. I don't think it's a fair judgment overall, really and what I think it is, I think the way I'd put it would be something like it wasn't inward looking in that it connected with the incoming, that the incoming was listened to and it steered the work. Whatever was happening in the contemporary as it were did... And, it was a great gift to call it Contemporary Cultural Studies really because it did mean you had to attend to what was going on out there and a lot of the work did do exactly that. But, it wasn't so successful a practice in returning it to whatever was out there. But, that's much more difficult I think. You know, what, unless you're a kind of Social Policy orientated department or a Business Studies or... there are ways..., or Engineering department you know, there are ways of being applied in that way. No, I think there was some good, I mean you've uncovered a few things; I think that I didn't altogether know about where there are returns happening. I think I was perhaps, Michael might have been on the more applied side and I might have been on the more academic side in a way and Maureen somewhere in between. Certainly Maureen very engaged with science and gender debates. You see you can be outward looking as an academic department; you can invite your speakers from other departments and have your seminar series. But, it's a different thing engaging with other kinds of... having other kinds of impacts as the jargon goes. That's rarer, especially in humanisms, well some social sciences, but now of course, from a perspective now because I am... I do movement politics all the time now and from that perspective any academic politics is very limited. To be honest I noticed that with the new, new left manifesto you know, it's academic. It is. It doesn't foreground the problem of what we're to do.

Kieran Connell: It analyses.

Richard Johnson: It's analysis, yes and it's nice but actually it's quite familiar and it's... where is it pointing in terms of the future? That's what I said to Stuart when we had this first exchange and he sent me the long version and why I wrote the soundings piece, what is now the soundings piece. It's different; it's a different way of operating. So, in a way I suppose all the work was rather academic. Well, not all of it because some people were really studying, what shall we say, community actions, types of community action. So I mean I'm not the best, as I've said before to you, I'm not the best person to talk about this because I was fully engaged in the academic politics if you like and that was what..., being in the University, changing the University, doing things in a different way in the University that started me off, really politically.

Kieran Connell: So, just to finish then, you left in '93, Birmingham .

Richard Johnson: Yeah.

Kieran Connell: Were you ready to go?

Richard Johnson: Yes, but I mean the sort of going was a long process. It relates to the other story I told you about, the domestic and what was happening at home, also just recognising that it was very exhausting. So, I mean the story, if I remember it rightly is that, well I decided not to be head of the new department, is it in '89?

Kieran Connell: '88.

[1:32:36]

Richard Johnson: '88. So, I definitely remember taking the decision I don't want to contest or be considered for headship of Sociology and Cultural Studies. I think about the same time I took early retirement, or was that a bit...? That must have been a bit later. I think it's about a year or so later.

Kieran Connell: 1990 I think it was.

Richard Johnson: About '89-'90, because then I continued part time for three years. So I'm kind of edging out but I think there's the feeling that I can't sustain it really without killing myself and on the other hand, probably even more important really a sense of not being a very good father and partner, not being at all a good father and partner. Then the intermediate period which I was sort of trying to solve the problem by having another relationship, and that of course, just made things worse. So at one point, I was thinking I really need the time to have like two major relationships in my life so I better go part time. So it was impossible because I was really in love with them both and I didn't want to leave either of them. It was just impossible, it wasn't going to work. Then you see, Jill died so, well first my dad died, he died first and my mum came to live with us. Then Jill's dad died and she was very upset about that. Then she was reorganised at school and she lost her special needs teaching and became a class teacher again which she was very upset about and really stretched her as well. Then she died and so that was '92, so basically I was out of it. Well I carried on teaching, I did teach one more year of the MA and that was the year of Rosina I think (laughter). It really ended with a bang. So it had been pre-planned but the reason for it was to spend more time at home and then Jill wasn't there and I was there with my mum and both children had left home. So, it's a bit of a myth that but it feels like a big transition to a parent.

Kieran Connell: That's when, shortly afterwards you went to...

Richard Johnson: Yes well I think there was about, there was less than a year I think. Nearly a year, perhaps it was nearly a year. There were two years before I moved to Leicester but I think, did I go to Nottingham Trent before? Well it's at least one year before I go to Nottingham Trent, so I don't have a job and just surviving really because we were all very grief stricken and only just coping. So that was time out really, and there's a bit of a time out about it really all from the '90s onwards, I think I lost contact with what was happening also in public life, certainly in academic work in that period, though I'd solved the problem of teaching theory. So I was very pleased about that. I knew just how to do it and it was working. Do you know when you're teaching and you know it's working.

Kieran Connell: It clicks.

Richard Johnson: It clicks, and you see the students they are really sitting up and it's really changing stuff around. So that was contradictory last time, and of course I took some of that feeling into the new job and the new job was really, really good, and that really worked actually. I think people had some really good experiences, PhD students there for a while.

Kieran Connell: Then you were at Nottingham.

Richard Johnson: That was just in post-retirement, 65 so they didn't want me to carry on in those days. I don't know whether you can now and I didn't want to be emeritus or anything in Nottingham Trent bloody commercial University.

Kieran Connell: Well thanks very much, that was really great.

[End of Transcript]