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THE OPEN UNIVERSITY

D102/31

THE SOCIAL SCIENCES: A FOUNDATION COURSE

"COMPETING THEORIES?"

Executive Producer	David Seligman
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Taking Part: Bernard Williams  
Stuart Hall

This programme is number 31 for the course D102, in which Bernard Williams, Provost of Kings College, Cambridge and Stuart Hall, Professor of Sociology at the OU debate the competing individualist (pluralist) and marxist models of politics.

D102 Sig. Tune/Generic Title 30"

2-S BERNARD WILLIAMS  
STUART HALL  
S/I TITLE 'COMPETING  
THEORIES?'

BERNARD WILLIAMS:

MCU BERNARD

S/I IDENT. \_\_\_\_\_

This is the 3rd of 4 Television programmes in which I have the chance to discuss some general, one might say philosophical issues, which have come up during the Course.

One basic question faced by the Social Sciences, is what makes societies stick together. What social forces contain, and control conflict, and how.

We face this question in various forms during the Course, and both this T.V. programme and the next will be looking at different ways in which this question can be approached, and how these different ways of approaching it tie up with different kinds of social explanation.

Z/O TO MS

One way of tackling the question of social cohesion was presented in Unit 21, which approached it from a particular sociological point of view, and discussed the forces, which within a kind of social structure work to manage conflict and to produce consent.

MS STUART HALL \_\_\_\_\_ Unit 21 was prepared by/ Stuart Hall,  
Professor of Sociology at the Open University,  
MS BERNARD \_\_\_\_\_ and/ today I'm going to be talking to Stuart  
about some of the ideas used in that kind  
of explanation. In particular about the  
idea of structural social forces, as  
against explanations at an individual  
level, and about what sort of picture,  
such a theory gives us of the individual  
and society.

MS STUART \_\_\_\_\_ Stuart, you remember that earlier on in  
the Course we were given two models, /of  
the relation of the State to Society.  
I think perhaps it might be helpful for us  
if we started by looking back at those two

MS BERNARD \_\_\_\_\_ /models we were given. You remember  
one of them was the pluralist model, in  
which the State was particularly represented  
to us, as being a sort of process, but  
which managed, or processed the demands  
which came from society.

VT INSERT

ANIMATED DIAGRAM

DAVID POTTER (ON VT.)

In the Pluralist picture the State  
receives all these demands, or inputs.

DAVID POTTER (ON VT) CONTD.

Those inputs are then processed within the State, decisions are made, action taken, and that action comes out of the State as an output, and goes back into Society. And those outputs either meet the demands, or at least affect the groups concerned. Leading them to make further modified demands on the State and so on.

STUDIO

BERNARD WILLIAMS

MCU BERNARD

Well Stuart you recall that as against that Pluralist picture of how the State is related to Society, we were offered another and contrasting model, which was in broad terms a Marxist model, which represented the relation of the State to society, very much in terms of one particular fundamental conflict in society, which was the conflict between classes.

MCU STUART

VT INSERT.

ANIMATED DIAGRAM

DAVID POTTER (ON VT.)

It is the State that fulfils the vital role of stopping the class conflict getting out of hand, and destroying capitalist society.

DAVID POTTER (ON VI.) CONTD.

Now in the Marxist picture, the State must be separate from both capital and labour, in order to regulate the conflict between them. By being separate, it can also deal effectively with any conflict within capital. The State regulates this conflict in order to maintain order in society, and that's what any state normally does in any society.

But the order the State maintains in capitalist society, is a particular order, a capitalist order, and thus the State naturally tends in the long run to operate more in the interest of capital than of labour. The State will meet the demands of labour, but only as long as doing so does not get in the way of its main job of maintaining the capitalist order.

2-S

BERNARD WILLIAMS

MCU BERNARD

/Well Stuart I think the first thing I'd like to ask you is how fundamental the difference in the end between these two stories is, if at least the stories are made a bit more realistic and a bit less schematic than they necessarily are in those pictures.

BERNARD WILLIAMS (CONTD.)

MCU STUART

2-S

Um, one thing I think is this, that the Marxist picture that we were given in the second model there, is pretty simplified is'nt it, for a/modern Marxist picture, because it gives us just two classes in conflict, a capitalist class and a/labour class. But I think that every Marxist theorist is going to agree that this picture has changed quite a lot since the time that Marx wrote, because for instance because of the divorce of control of business from ownership of business. (and of technocrats who don't quite belong) The importance of managerial classes, // to these classes and so on.

MCU BERNARD

Would you agree that certainly at any rate the story would have to be modified quite a lot.

STUART HALL

MCU STUART  
S/I Ident

/Oh the story would certainly have to be modified to take account of modern conditions, it's probably even had to be modified at a time when Marx wrote, but certainly for modern conditions we have to be changed. One would have to admit all those complexities you're talking about.

STUART HALL (CONTD.)

Differences in class structure, not just a two class model, the fact that concessions had been won through the State by the working class against capital. Welfare provisions for instance. The fact that the State does itself intervene in order to secure conditions which don't only pay off the capitalist. All those things are different.

I suppose the question is then, granted that the model is simplified, does it nevertheless get us to a sort of essential truth about the model.

MCU BERNARD

BERNARD - Yes.

STUART HALL

MCU STUART

And that I suppose would be locating something absolutely sort of central, and fundamental about that/capitalist-labour relation, and saying that at least is something which no capitalist state, I mean it's a sort of first and last requirement of the capitalist state to attend to that, in the sense that is, that's the problem which establishes the

STUART HALL (CONTD.)

limits of the field of operation of the State. Whatever else it's doing, it must ensure the continuity of capitalist interests, and if necessary it must secure things so that they prevail over anybody elses/interest. I suppose that's what's central to the Marxist model.

BERNARD WILLIAMS

MCU BERNARD One of the features of the Marxist, the Marxist picture is'nt it, is that there's an important connection between one of the conflicting elements in society, and those who control the state, The State is not an impartial arbiter between all the conflicts in societies, perhaps the Pluralist model suggests. It suggested somehow just impersonally there to sort out the conflicts in society. (In the Marxist picture there is a dominating class in some sense, or dominating set of people who are peculiarly associated with the State. And I take it that's the distinctive, one distinctive feature of it).

MCU STUART



STUART HALL

I think that's the distinction between the Pluralist and the Marxist one. I think in the sense, in this sense, the Pluralist model has two distinguishing factors. One is that the state itself doesn't seem to have an interest in what its outputs are. I mean it wants to manage them effectively and so on, but it doesn't have any commitment to as it were, who should win out of a particular set of bargaining operations. And it doesn't see society as structured so that one group or class has a kind of continuity permanent built-in major dominant interest. The interests shift.

The Marxist model on the other hand obviously has the notion that the State has an interest that capitalist outcomes will on the whole prevail, and talks about society as if it's more class structured.

However, within that I think we've, we've seen a lot of developments in the way in which Marxists talk about the relationship between the State and the capitalist class.

There was a time when I think people imagined that the State was simply a sort of political committee of the capitalist class, just doing its bidding, and it's perfectly clear that this is too simple a relation, and if there's a relationship between the capitalist State and the capitalist class, or the interests of capital, it has to be in a more long term, I would say structural....conceived in a more structural way, not in a sort of conspiratorial way of capitalist, ringing up the Cabinet and telling them what to decide./

MCU BERNARD

STUART HALL

MCU STUART

And one has to acknowledge that there are differences between different sectors of the capitalist state. I mean the industrial capital might have a different interest in respect to interest rates than financial capital, investor capital wants them low, and financial capital wants them high. And I think one of the interesting things that's happened in the discussion, Marxist discussion about the State, is the recognition that the State may play a role not just in handling the contradiction between capital and labour, but even as it were, helping to





BERNARD WILLIAMS (CONTD.)

have some shared interest, which is'nt necessarily a class interest or anything of this kind, and this latter gives a more individualist picture. Do you think that there is anything in that contrast?

STUART HALL.

2-S o/s BERNARD  
Z/I to MS STUART

/Yes, I would have said that the Pluralist picture is on the whole a more individualist one. In this sense that it, it sees the State functioning, I think very much on the classical model of the market. That's to say individuals come in, and they buy and bargain and sell for a price, and finally they settle and all the State does in a sense is to sort of maintain the rules of fair bargaining. But then I think that even where Pluralism has had to concede that of course one's dealing with groups and institutions and so on, not just individuals. It's individualist in this sense that it conceives how they function very much as individuals function.

STUART HALL.

It conceives of interest groups coming in to an arena and trying to get something out of it. And then in a sense dissolving and discovering other interests, and going off somewhere else.

BERNARD WILLIAMS.

MS BERNARD

\_\_\_\_\_/Yes, that's a bit abstract isn't it, of course the trouble is that both these models are bound to be a bit abstract. I mean the Pluralist is presumably going to point out that there are individual people who can turn up in their relations to the state in different ways, at different points. I mean at one point they may be interested in certain kinds of ideals, as you say environmental ideals. At another point they may have an interest as people who have got children to be educated. At another point they may have an interest as people who strongly believe in the policies of one political party rather than another and so on. And they, I think, perhaps is part of the force of what you're saying applies to the Pluralist picture is this, that you should'nt necessarily be able to

predict too strongly which particular individuals will join up with which under different ones of these umbrellas. The model they have is we all know that we can be surprised to find that one of our/friends has some view about political issue, or something that we had'nt expected or..

MS STUART

STUART HALL.

Which is'nt consonant.

BERNARD WILLIAMS.

Which is'nt consonant.

STUART HALL.

What interests that they might have expressed in another market.....I'd say.

BERNARD WILLIAMS.

MS BERNARD

Now the other picture/is strongly emphasising the idea, is'nt it, that from some basic social facts about somebody you can predict an awful lot about both what he's going to believe, and what he's going to stand for, and what he's going to want, and what's

BERNARD WILLIAMS (CONTD.)

going to happen to him.

STUART HALL.

2-3 o/s BERNARD

Z/I to MS STUART

Yes and I think that would be the way in which the Marxist model, however you / modify and qualify it, would be not individualist in it's starting position. That is to say first of all it would want to know what are the systematic relations in which individuals stand to one another, and how much can that tell you. And then modern Marxists would of course introduce the fact that this is predictable within a range but not absolutely predictable and you're constantly surprised to find cross alliances and so on.

BERNARD WILLIAMS.

Yes.

STUART HALL.

But it would see a more permanent continuous set of interests, principally around class but not only that. As providing a kind of backbone structuring for the way in which the state relates to social groups, and so on.



BERNARD WILLIAMS.

2-S

I think this leads to a point which I think we discussed much, some of it was discussed earlier on in the series actually, which is the question about how under the structuralist story, the structural forces are seen as working on individuals. / Sometimes if you listen to some Marxists and similar structuralists accounts of society, it sounds as if there were mysterious forces at work moving people round on the streets, or in various places in society, without as it were going through their heads at all. That the individuals were completely, as it were, merely caught up in structural force. Now that picture can't be right, out like I mean they don't go / somnabulists, they must have ideas in their heads which are making them move, making them act.

MS BERNARD

STUART HALL.

MS STUART

/ I mean that simple notion that individuals are simply propelled by sort of abstract social forces, and totally determined in what they'll do etc., without passing through consciousness and intention and purpose etc., is wrong. But still I think there's a basic difference in what

STUART HALL (CONT'D.)

your starting point is. Because I think in some ways the Pluralist model does begin with the rationally calculative ideas inside individuals' heads, and then sees action as flowing from that.

Whereas I think the structuralist might say, well people are in social relations, and of course they have to explain how they got there, what they are going to do now they're in them, and that is what, as it were gives rise to particular forms of consciousness. So I think the two models locate where consciousness comes in at a different point. And I'd have said the individualist model tends to see individual consciousness as if it were the point of origin from which explanations as to action flow. Whereas the structural model would look at the relations into which individuals are set, and then as it were see how they make sense of it.

BERNARD WILLIAMS.

2-S o/s STUART

/Well now, the point is of course once we look at both these models in greater detail, and with greater realism, once again they get a bit nearer to each other don't they.

BERNARD WILLIAMS (CONTD.)

Because a sensible individualist, if we can for a moment call him that, somebody who would support the sort of Pluralist model we're talking about here, the sensible individualist is not going to deny that people get their ideas from education, from their parents, from the media, from talking to people in the pub and so on. It's not that every individual actor is made up his entire world picture for himself. And if indeed if he did do that he couldn't be an actor in society. In fact I think everybody would have to agree that nobody could be an individual actor in a society, unless it was the case that quite a lot of what he believed and thought came from the society around him, and in the way he was educated and so on.

So both parties will say that what people do is due in a sense to what's in their heads quite a lot of the time, and both will agree that what's in their heads depends upon, you know, society, and the way they've been brought up. But the structuralist will emphasise very much more the degree to which these are

correlated with items like class, with class interest, with the way - the way in which som... the social structures in which somebody has been brought up.

STUART HALL.

MS STUART

Yes./ I don't think that that's so much to my mind the main difference. The main difference for me in the point of origin, the point of departure. You see I think no matter how far the Pluralist goes in qualifying the sort of social context in which individuals are formed and think and act. Nevertheless they do ultimately think that the individual provides a sort of basic cell form from which all other social explanations can be derived. In a sense their explanations of society are rather like the sort of Adam and Eve story. Nothing exists, then you put as it were (a) and (b) together, and from that you can extrapolate how social relations develop.

Now I think what the structuralist says is you can't start there, because most societies have got past the (a) and (b) stage.

BERNARD WILLIAMS.

Of course yes.

STUART HALL.

(C) comes into a society in which (a) and (b), mother and father say, are already not individuals, but in the mother/father relation.

BERNARD WILLIAMS.

Yes of course.

STUART HALL.

Ang a good deal of what (c) will become is given by those relations. Long before (c) has any ideas to develop at all. So I think it's in that starting point that structuralism insists on starting somewhere else, and as it were producing or the explanation of how individuals are, at a later stage. It's the end of the structuralist explanation. Yes, that's how as it were social forces produce individuals who act like that. Whereas I think Pluralists say that's what individuals are, and in a social context they will act like that.

2-S

BERNARD WILLIAMS.

MS BERNARD

Well there is one important difference certainly, which may help to illuminate that difference you refer to, which is that structuralists want to make some use of the idea that the agents often don't know what they are doing. They have an explanation of it, so that explanation it actually masks or stands in for some deeper structural explanation of what they're doing, which is'nt perhaps available to them. And of course one example, particularly about the function of the state is this, some Marxist critics will say, that various bourgeois agents in society, who think quite sincerely that they are acting in the public interest, for the national good or impartially, are in fact acting in a class interest and to the disadvantage of labour. And that in a way the objective meaning of what they are doing is something more connected with the interests of the class, than it certainly seems to the actors themselves. They are not just lying they have sincere views about this which are however very partial, is that not the case?

2-S o/s BERNARD

STUART HALL:

Z/I TO MS STUART

Yes. / "You see I think because

Pluralists take as a central starting point individuals and how they express their motivations and so on, they think that thought, social thought about society etc., must be more transparent to what society is really like, it gives you a pretty accurate picture of what society is like, because after all people have to calculate how they're going to act on the basis of it.

Whereas I think structuralists would say you can have a perfectly good and logical explanation of why it is you're acting. Nevertheless, you... it may be impossible for you to see the constraints which have pushed you in that direction, or inhibited you from taking it etc., and that I think is a very important difference.

BERNARD:

MS BERNARD \_\_\_\_\_

The fact is that there is a difficulty at the end of the line in keeping the more moderate and sensible versions of these two models that we're dealing with, from I won't say, totally coming together, but getting actually much closer to each other than/might have been originally thought.

2-S \_\_\_\_\_

STUART HALL:

MS STUART \_\_\_\_\_

Yes. I mean I think those, as it were convergences between the two models, each giving up its own simplifications, and taking on more the burden of complexities of the real social world, has brought it in touch with one another, and I think that's very good.



STUART HALL (CONTD.)

I think it's good even from a strictly social scientific point of view in the sense that there's no point in testing Marxism by as it were Marxist facts.

It's the good thing to put Marxism up against the Pluralist model, and to say well don't, don't these reconciliation of interests go on, all the time around you. So you have to test the argument against as it were the strongest argument from the other side.

BERNARD WILLIAMS.

MS BERNARD

So the testing goes in the other direction as well. Because the Pluralist should also face the undoubtedly valuable social scientific concepts (cough) excuse me, which have been given to us by these...

STUART HALL.

MS STUART

Yes I think in that sense Pluralism has made, had to make up a lot of ground, it's come away from its highly rationalistic individualistic way of perceiving things. It's moved towards recognition of elites and so on.

STUART HALL (CONTD.)

It's much more sensitive to the dimension of power, than Pluralism used to be. And those concessions have been made and convergences have been arrived at. I suppose at the end of the day the question is whether there is so much convergence, that the distinctiveness of the perspectives we started with have been entirely lost.

BERNARD WILLIAMS.

MS BERNARD \_\_\_\_\_ / Stuart Hall thank you very much indeed.

Z/I to MCU \_\_\_\_\_ One thing we've seen in this discussion is that if you modify these two models of State and society, to deal with modern conditions, it's surprising how close they can get to each other. Nevertheless, that mustn't make us forget that there are still some pretty fundamental differences between these two models.

One, and this is a point that Stuart emphasised, is that on the Marxist model the state has certain definite and continuing interests, whereas on the

BERNARD WILLIAMS (CONTD.)

Pluralist model, the perspective is rather more that of a State which has'nt got any interests of its own, but is open to dealing with any interests that may be presented to it.

And there is another difference. On the Pluralist view, if the capitalist state collapses, and is overcome by violence, then that is the product of its failure to deal with certain inputs, certain tensions, certain demands made on it, which it might have been able to deal with, but for one reason or another failed.

And on the Marxist perspective however, the collapse of the capitalist state would be, I think if the Marxist perspective would say, will be, the product of contradictions which are inherent in it, and which will be mentioned in any proper description of it as a capitalist state.

Well the discussion of those issues of course are absolutely central to any discussion of the relation of the State to social cohesion and how societies hold together.

BERNARD WILLIAMS (CONTD.)

Well an important feature of all this discussion has been that it has all been done in terms of sociological concepts. Concepts such as class, and ideology. In the next and last T.V. programme of the Course, I'm going to be discussing some other kinds of explanation which have been offered of social stability.

2-S S/I CREDITS

MUSIC. 30"