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ON MARGINS AND CENTRES
An Interview with Alan Sinfield

Professor Alan Sinfield, of the University of Sussex, is the author of the now classic study *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (1989). In the second edition of this book (1997) he includes a new chapter in which he comments on recent developments in English literature and suggests new directions for intellectuals at the beginning of the new millennium. The topics raised in this chapter are taken as a starting point for the present interview in which he is also asked about the clash between high and low culture, the legacy of Raymond Williams and the relation of literature to recent events in European history. Finally, he is invited to put forward his views on some current issues concerning another area of his interest, Lesbian and Gay Studies.

Q.—In the opening chapter of the second edition of *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* you speak of the hopes created by the settlement of 1945 in Britain, and it is implied that those hopes were not fulfilled. Do you think this fact has marked British intellectuals? Has it made them bitter, disappointed?

A.—I think there is disappointment for some people, depending on when you were born and what generation you belong to. I think what we call “the sixties” by and large wiped out the memory of 1945, so it’s something which nowadays older people would be interested in. It spoke to me because my father was killed in World War II in the Air Force and my mother never had much of a life after that, apart from my brother and myself, and to some extent that general story has all those personal stories within it. But it’s not just a sense of disappointment and bitterness, it’s also that 1945 was one of those moments when it might have been possible to do something different; the system might have been readjusted. If that could have been delivered we might have had a different modern world altogether; not just for individuals.

The goal of welfare-capitalism was to get everybody on board. We worry now about society being exclusive; the aspiration then was to pick up the people who in the inter-war period had always been set apart and very bedraggled really, and try to make a space for everybody. But the trouble is that it has to be done with sufficient generosity to be persuasive, otherwise you get renewed sectional interests. In particular, if you maintain full employment then that puts organised labour in a better bargaining position, leading to an anxiety in the 1960s, when it was believed that trade union reforms were a necessity and ought to keep Britain as a model capitalist country.

Q.—You make a severe criticism of British intellectuals of the postwar period (“we hadn’t really worked out a system to supersede welfare-capitalism” 1997: xxi) and what you propose is to orientate the efforts of the intellectuals to a subcultural constituency. Isn’t that a way of admitting that intellectuals cannot play a role in, say, national politics and influence a greater part of the population?

A-. Yes, I think what you say is right, but the proposition that intellectuals will be influential is much more credible in continental Europe than it is in England or the United States, which is the other place where people like us tend to look. I think that relatively speaking, compared with the way that people in Britain and England normally think, the expectations I have of intellectuals are quite large, though they may not seem large in relation to Italy or Spain.

Q.—In the new chapter you seem particularly impressed by Irvine Welsh’s *Trainspotting* (1993). Does it herald a new kind of writing? Is it time for a subversive kind of literature?

A.—Of course these new trends are never entirely new and there is another Scottish novelist called James Kelman who is different but has some things that Welsh has. Again, one might look at *American Psycho*, say, and other writing from the United States; this is more about the drugs scene and about people who are losing control and living in diminished conditions. So I think you can find things that precede *Trainspotting*, but that novel draws them together and gives them a new focus, partly a Scottish focus, partly an international focus. So it becomes a significant book and produces further commentary. I don’t find that Welsh’s later books have really developed that promise; I think perhaps he hasn’t seen what it is that people find important about *Trainspotting*, so he’s been developing rather different lines.

Q.—The transgressive attitude in *Trainspotting* is not so new, then.

A.—The novel I compare it with, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958) by Alan Sillitoe, is a much quieter, tamer book because it is a long time ago, but there is a comparable transgressive impetus in the working class

there. I think that has been an available possibility all the way through really, it is just that sometimes we have focused on different things.

Q.—In your book you also speak of the breakdown in the concept of literature when disconcerting attitudes break into high culture. Can you envisage an outcome for this situation in the future?

A.—Yes, I think that for a literary work to include diverse cultures is not surprising. T.S. Eliot does that, we can handle that. But if cultures that appear to be incompatible with literary culture start getting into what appear to be literary works, that does seem to saw off the branch that the book was sitting on, you might say, and undermine its stability and authority. I think that there is a general tendency for literature to lose aura, coming from the commercialization as well, including prizes, hyping of books, sponsoring or whatever. I think the combination of all those things is altering the status of literature. That may make it more interesting, it is not necessarily a bad thing. Most societies one can envisage will have some kind of prose fiction, but whether some of it has to be called literature is another question.

Q.—You have written at large about the rise of “English Lit.”. Has it taken the status of the epitome of high culture?

A.—It certainly was talked of in that way sometimes, but I am not sure it has been working like that, mainly because when you study things, even if you study them very respectfully, you still gain some control over them. So I am not sure that there was a special, high cultural experience for most people who studied literature. In examinations you had to think how you were going to answer the question, so even the most conservative kinds of literary teaching act against the kind of transcendent experience where you are so exalted by the poetic text that you have the physical excitement that people speak of. But literature did become very substantial and widespread. After all, it is what the English were supposed to be good at, in the same way that Italians were good at painting and the Germans at music. So it has had a central ideological role which is partly to do with it being a high culture, but also to do with being approachable for lots of people. It doesn't require a great technical grounding, unlike music, for instance. Everybody, nearly everybody, can read a book and if asked to comment on it can make some comment. It's a teaching and learning subject.

Q.—And what is the role of what you call the “major high-cultural gatekeepers” (*The Times, Times Literary Supplement...*) in relation to “English Lit.”? Do they easily accept new writing, for instance?

A.—One of the helpful concepts that Raymond Williams mentions is “asymmetry”. This means that although you might think that retaining the concept of literature and developing it would be broadly compatible with

serious newspapers and the reviewing styles they have, at the same time it is in their immediate interest to seize upon scandalous stories and disreputable writing. So the immediate story of this week may conflict with the story of the decade, and the gatekeeper can simultaneously be anxious about these changes and help to promote them by writing and talking about them.

Q.—And what about an influential sector of the British reading public (liberal middle class, centre-left in politics), how do they react to disreputable writing?

A.—The sort of middle class grouping that you mention could well be interested in other groups and could be looking for alternative developments and ways to make their life more interesting. The fact that many readers may have a conventional job doesn't necessarily make them want to read about other people's conventional jobs, possibly the opposite. These safe enclaves of British life are all under threat: we have electronic alarms on our houses, passwords on our computers. The threat of the dispossessed is always there and that's the sort of thing that will produce a fascination in fictive writing.

Q.—You have just mentioned Raymond Williams. Could you make a brief assessment of his work?

A.—Williams is important because he was very prolific and did a great deal, and across his lifetime's work he focuses on different aspects at different times and his attitude to literature and culture does change during the course of that. Substantially it changes in relation to other circumstances around it, so it's not on the whole a matter of saying "here are some statements by Williams, these are the truth"; it's a matter of him having a continuous engagement with a range of topics, and other people using his work to make interventions that were sometimes clearer or more effective. I'm thinking of Stuart Hall, for instance.

People interested in these topics will continue to go back to Williams' books and they will continue to be useful, not because they transmit a direct wisdom but because they provide something to think about. He is rather difficult to read, his prose is quite opaque; sometimes he allows his uncertainty about the direction of the argument to lead him into obscurity.

Q.—Has he created some sort of school, followers?

A.—I don't think he ever tried to establish a school. To do that you need to do other things than write books, you need to organize conferences and get yourself on the television. You need to cultivate your research students quite carefully. I don't think he was very interested in doing that, which is kind of odd because he did mean to be a socialist which should mean joint action, shared conditions, but he devoted himself to writing.

Q.—Another important personality, Malcolm Bradbury, said that after the fall of the Berlin Wall he couldn't find a writer who had grasped the spirit of the times. Would you agree with that?

A.—I can't think of a writer who has done that; but then I wouldn't necessarily expect that to happen. Writing is an interaction with its age, but that doesn't mean to say that it encapsulates it in some way.

Q.—So it's not a question of novels taking time to catch up with historic events like the fall of the Berlin Wall.

A.—I'm not sure if the event has caught up yet, I'm not sure what the fall of the Berlin Wall meant. You have to say what did the Berlin Wall mean before to people in Europe. I think people in the West have forgotten about it.

Q.—But wouldn't you say it meant the end of a period and the beginning of another?

A.—One of the things that was interesting at that time of the dissolution of the Soviet empire was what was going to be there instead. In most of the Soviet block countries there were movements of left liberal intellectuals and other activists and workers which seemed to have in mind some other kind of way, not Soviet but on the other hand not like the West. Those groups mostly got smothered and wiped out by the rapid Western occupation of the East, and so the promise of something different wasn't realised—just as the promise of 1968, say, was different from the outcome.

Q.—Finally I would also like to ask you about one of your interests, Lesbian and Gay Studies. It seems that the main debate in recent years has been about the commodification of gay culture. What is your position in this respect?

A.—I come at this from a gay left perspective, and my immediate response was always to suppose that it would be better if we could conduct gay subcultures on some kind of public basis other than commodification. However that's rather puritanical and austere, and I like going out and dancing and having a drink as much as anybody else. With commodification quite a lot depends on the scale of the operation. If two people start up a restaurant and do some gay décor so it's nice for gay people to go there and they produce decent food at reasonable prices, that's not the military industrial complex. That kind of business is welcome.

I think a problem for a lot of gay and lesbian people is that it's difficult to take part in many aspects of public life and personal life. Many young people are not in a very good relation with their parents, or there's some ambiguity and uncertainty there. Maybe at work also gayness has to be scouted round or avoided. So one way or another there are large areas of life where gay men and lesbians find it difficult to locate themselves and to feel that, yes,

part of this space belongs to them. The consequence is that the commodifying opportunities for gay people, which of course are there for straight people too, become the only point of development: the whole gay life is standing on a very little space, to do with whether you've bought the right kind of jewelry or whether you are wearing your baseball cap backwards or forwards. So that's the problem with commodification: it's occurring in a context where so many other aspects of life are hard to develop.

Q.—You relate the lesbian and gay identities to metropolitan culture (2000: 150). Could you expand on that?

A.—When you look around the world, you find what appear to be sorts of homosexuality taking quite different forms from the way we experience them in the metropolitan centres of North Western Europe and the East and West coast of the United States. Nonetheless, it's very easy for people in those centres to suppose that theirs is the ultimate model of what a gay man or a lesbian should be like. When you strip off all the confusions, what emerges is a New York or a San Francisco lesbian or gay man. I see it the other way round: looking at the way things are done in other parts of the world may help us to realise that the gay image that we have is really quite local. Yet, at the same time, globalisation is taking the metropolitan image all round the world, and it is thriving now in cities like Johannesburg or Bangkok. So there is this interaction between the global and the local, but we should see it as travelling both ways.

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