

Interview with Alan Sinfield

Alan Sinfield has been making significant contributions to different fields of literary studies since the early 1980s. As one of the major representatives of cultural materialism, he has been influential in the study of the Renaissance and Shakespeare, modern and early modern theatre, and post-war literature and culture, just to name the most important of his interests. It is also vital to emphasize that his activities reach beyond the strictly academic; his work associated with sexual minorities, sexual and left-wing politics proved to be instructive both for professional and the general public. Accordingly, his writings try to reach a wider audience by expressing his subtle and often complicated observations in a simple manner. The interview published here was made in March, when Mr Sinfield, on his second visit to Hungary, presented a paper at the conference *Shakespeare and Philosophy in a Multicultural World* (Eötvös Loránd University, 17th to 20th March 2004), supported by the British Council.

You wrote two books on Tennyson, the first one published in 1971, the second in 1986. They are completely different, however, the first one being on a formalist track, the second utterly political. What changed your perspective so radically in that fifteen-year interval?

In 1971 I was trying to work out questions of poetry, using linguistics as well as literary critical methods, and I think around that time there was considerable excitement about the prospect of understanding literary language in those terms. But by 1986 literary criticism ran out of steam and what had seemed an exciting project from the 1950s on became repetitive and routine. Anybody could do it by 1972. And I thought I had either to give up literary criticism as a frivolous activity or to find a way to make it more significant and valuable than just a formalist enterprise. The horrors and atrocities of the time culminated, and the difficulty in talking about those things in relation to literature seemed to diminish the literature. As we entered the 1970s and into the Thatcher years, years of great social and political division in England, the attempt to try and find a language which would talk about the politics as well as about literature seemed an imperative. To some extent, the same applies in the US as well, where it is often pointed out that British cultural materialism is very similar to new historicism, but not identical to it. The difference and incompatibility there proved a point of energy, a

place to try and change things. For the most part, it was enabling that people were doing things differently on the two sides of the Atlantic. It was rather helpful and gave us food for thought.

So you think it was primarily the political context that made literary studies radically political by the 1980s?

The discourse of literature that was dominant at the time just made it very difficult to talk about *Henry V* and the My Lai massacre at the same time. It would have sounded like a gross intrusion: two language registers coming together in a way that was socially, as it were, unacceptable. That is what we were trying to change, really. Hinging this around Shakespeare was valuable because the Bard was taken to be the ultimate cultural token, full of beauty and truth. To state that Shakespeare plays were political was provocative and much disputed in magazines and journals. Shakespeare made it all the more exciting, and worth attempting. Also, there were theatrical productions of Shakespeare which recognized the extent to which the plays might relate to political circumstances in the twentieth century as well as how they may have allowed audiences to see the disruptive or counterproductive aspects of the state and of the ruling elite in Shakespeare's time.

You mentioned new historicism and cultural materialism as being two adjacent trends in literary studies, the one institutionalised in the US, the other in the UK. You repeatedly return to the question of their differences in your writing, partly for political reasons.

I think that to differentiate is always a good idea. There were different strands within cultural materialism as well as in new historicism. This was partly because these practices were new and scarcely theorized. Let me just mention that many cultural materialists presented the argument that the system of rule in Shakespeare's time was more violent than productive. But if you look at Jonathan Dollimore's *Radical Tragedy*, he is arguing to the contrary. He says that these plays, like other plays by Shakespeare's contemporaries, are actually pointing at, and working with, disruptive elements in society, rather than with some kind of dominant ideology or Elizabethan world picture. So for Jonathan, these Shakespeare plays themselves had been radical in the first place, and this fact will have been obscured by twentieth century criticism. He is discovering a radical Shakespeare while others, like new historicists, are finding a Shakespeare more complicit with his time. Greenblatt, for example, would say that there remained no subversion in these plays for us because we no longer share the conditions they were in.

Are you also talking about methodological differences here?

To some extent I am. There are different practices, different kinds of use you are going to make of documents from Shakespeare's time, the kind of comparison between Shakespeare's play and those by other people. Some of them are more scholarly, some more respectful for the attempt to disclose historical conditions as opposed to more casual and impertinent uses of history. For example, when one takes a good essay by somebody like Christopher Hill or Natalie Zemon Davis, and use it as a leeway with a Shakespearean or some other text. These would be two different ways of thinking about methodological concerns.

*Cultural materialism in the 1980s is often defined as some kind of political interference with literary studies, and not only by those who thought it to be scandalous, but you and other practitioners made the same claims. At that time you were dealing with key authors like Shakespeare, Wilde or Tennyson, because they seemed to be the sites of political struggle. This strategy changes radically with your book *Gay and After* (1998), where you emphasise subcultural work. Why did you turn away from the mainstream?*

Perhaps it was the mainstream which turned away from us. This issue is better approached from the angle of the general political situation in Europe. It has to do with the difficulty we experience in sustaining a continuously radical and effective New Left proposition. The left in Europe (I mean Western Europe, Hungary may be different, it's too difficult for me to say) have traditionally been a broad left, based on a general consensus about the main issues, about the procedures that might be followed in connection with the familiar concepts and categories of class, race, gender, sexual orientation, etc. Even though the New Left was full of misogynists, racist, homophobes, etc., generally there was a basis upon which people could meet, dispute and find ways forward. Now this proposition of the New Left becomes so difficult to sustain that some people stop being in the left at all, while for others it becomes difficult to see how the general project can be taken further forward. Take my example. Until I was in my late forties I had imagined that some kind of transformation of society was going to occur. I did not have a sense of the possible new economic structure, or even of a new social structure, but I believed in a sustained dealing with poverty, injustice, prejudice, etc. As these became less plausible, I was simply suggesting that perhaps we needed to retreat for the time being to single-issue politics. With this strategy adopted, the intellectual or the literary critic will be looking for some kind of ground where s/he could stand. And from that point of view, if you had come from another country, or experienced yourself as racially different, or if you were gay or

lesbian, at least you had a constituency, a place to speak from, which was not obviously impertinent. Certain people might have failed to speak for the working class, but ethnic, racial and sexual minorities can still be in need of organic intellectuals of some kind.

Did you feel these political changes taking their toll inside academia? Do you see a general inertia of the political engagement of the 1980s? What I have in mind as an example is the efforts to restore the original meaning of cultural studies, to practice it as an engaged critique of contemporary culture.

Cultural studies proved difficult because it meant something different in the US and in Britain. Cultural studies was done most intensely at Birmingham University, at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. The people there experienced a profound division among the requirements of the education system, their working class and the lower middle class backgrounds, youth culture and student culture. In the US there was no starting point for that class-based analysis. Cultural studies there tended to be the study of races and ethnicities, which is, of course, not unreasonable, but lead to the general blurring of certain issues. As you more or less indicated, with its international acknowledgement, cultural studies became a field of study, rather than a disciplinary notion or a way of studying.

How does your work relate to these changes? So far your research has been concentrated on certain strategic fields: Shakespeare, Wilde, gay and lesbian theatre, gay subculture, etc. Where are you moving these days?

I am going to have a book out at the end of the year with Columbia. It is about gay subcultures, in fact, about issues of power and sexuality, the ways in which these are supposed to be negotiated, and the ways in which, when you look more closely at them, they are actually taking place. In the book I write mostly about novels, popular fiction, and also about cinema. So that is one thing I am doing. But I have always intended to get back to Shakespeare. I wrote an essay on *The Merchant of Venice* in 1986, and I thought it had further opportunities of development, together with a recent essay about *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Two Noble Kinsmen*. Both of these pieces are re-visiting questions of dissident reading with particular reference to genders and sexualities. I am into keeping that work going. The narrowing sense that people are expected to have a field is a recent notion, and quite unsatisfactory and undesirable, I think. Although difficult to manage, I see no reason why people should not work on several topics at the same time. It is also vital to keep your possible audience in mind. When working on lesbian and gay

issues it matters not only what you think and want to say, but also who you want to address, who you want to talk to, what kind of constituency you envisage. The fact is that if you announce a talk on gay studies, on the whole only gay people will come. This is unfortunate not only for queer theory. The proposition that gayness is the margin of heterosexuality, therefore you are not going to understand the one without the other, seems to be clearly demonstrated. Accordingly, heterosexuals ought to be more interested in gay studies than they usually are. However, there might be no way to persuade people. In short, I am trying to envisage two kinds of work now. One for particularly gay constituencies and one for wider conferences such as the one I am at in Hungary at the present time, for instance.

*Your book at Columbia seems to be on the track of *Gay and After*. In that book you try and evaluate the potentials for gay, and to a certain extent, lesbian politics. What kind of changes have you observed in the last five or six years with respect to individual cases as well as the general situation of gay and lesbian rights, and also in connection with the possibility for developing efficient political strategies?*

Since I was working on *Gay and After*, which is seven or eight years ago now, we've seen in Britain the accomplishment of a good part of the lesbian and gay progressive agenda. This includes Section 28 (the Conservative legislation restricting funding for the arts), and partnership rights (affecting immigration for gay partners, and pension and inheritance). There remains a vulnerability in employment rights. At the same time, right wing political groupings have become better organized and more vocal; in many places you still can't walk the streets with entire safety. The new book, *On Sexuality and Power*, is more about how we behave among ourselves. It is widely supposed that the most suitable partner will be someone very much like yourself (many heterosexuals think this too, it's often called 'companionate marriage'). Nonetheless, power differentials are remarkably persistent and they are sexy. What are the personal and political implications of this insight, I am asking? I argue that hierarchies in interpersonal relations are continuous with the main power differentials of our social and political life (gender, class, age, and race); therefore it is not surprising that they govern our psychic lives. Recent writing in fiction and film displays an exploration of the positive potential of hierarchy, especially in fantasy, as well as the dangers.

You also insist on your work with Shakespeare and emphasise the importance of dissident reading. You return repeatedly to the crucial difference between cultural materialist and new historicist arguments, to highlight the

significance of dissidence. What potentials do you see in pressing the dissident reading of Shakespeare plays these days?

The scope for dissident presentations of Shakespeare, on stage and in criticism, hasn't really changed since the onset of new historicism and cultural materialism. The alternatives are: to declare that Shakespeare is actually promoting a progressive position; and to declare that Shakespeare was a child of his time and hence unlikely to anticipate a modern progressive position. In the latter case, the text may be adjusted to produce a more suitable meaning. In the theatre this may involve unorthodox kinds of performance, or rewriting parts of the play. In criticism it is most likely to involve reading a play, self-consciously, against the grain, perhaps in a 'ludic' mode deriving from Roland Barthes. While new historicism was concerned to demonstrate the constructedness of history, in the same movement it was likely to claim a superior understanding of history as a fortunate by-product of dissident awareness.

Cultural materialism, aware of the constructedness of history but staying closer to Marxism, was inclined to assert from the start that its conception of history was better (more attentive to women, the class hierarchy, race). I intend to continue my work with Shakespeare because he still constitutes a major site where ideas and strategies are explored. This 2004 invitation to visit to Hungary was to speak on Shakespeare. Compared with twenty years ago, there is much more Shakespeare, in every medium all the time. This makes it more difficult to make an impact with any particular intervention. But it is still worth trying. Also, there was in the 1990s a sudden flurry of attention to Shakespeare and sexualities. This was very exciting work, but there are some more things I would like to say on this topic.

Although you name and list the major authors influencing your own work in your introduction to the Hungarian edition of your book, I would like you to talk about the history of cultural materialism and your idea of it. Does your awareness of different audiences have anything to do with the way you imagine the developments in connection with cultural materialism?*

Cultural materialism, the term itself, never belonged to me. It was invented by Raymond Williams, whom I met a few times. But I never worked with him and I was never studying at Cambridge at any time. Other people were also very important in

*Alan Sinfield's collection of essays (*Literary Studies and the Materiality of Culture*) has recently appeared in Hungarian. Cf. Alan Sinfield, *Irodalomkutatás és a kultúra materialitása*, ed. Antal Bókay & László Sári, trans. László Sári & Gábor Zoltán Kiss (Pécs & Budapest: Janus & Gondolat, 2004).

the history of cultural materialism, like Stuart Hall, although I do not think he had ever used the term. Before very long I realized that there was very important work done in feminist studies as well, which is called feminist socialism or feminist materialism, and it had quite a lot of sophistication already, having anticipated notions worked out by men in cultural materialism later. So cultural materialism has always been a kind of wandering concept, and you really do not get hold of it long enough to define its development. Rather, there are various kinds of things going on at the same time, and you work on one of them at one time and on another at another time. Cultural materialism can also appear a rather macho affair especially in comparison with the traditional, middle-class literary appreciation, which it opposed. It's generally taken for granted in Western Europe today that a broad left agenda includes rights for women and for ethnic and sexual minorities (however clumsy men, white people and straight people may be in practice). But I don't think there was immediately (say in the 1970s) much appreciation of this shared potential. I don't think the work has been done on this aspect of the history of left-wing thought, but what I believe actually happened was that male cultural materialists, drawing, as I've said, on Hall and Williams, found that socialist women had arrived at many of the same arguments, out of their own appraisal of cultural politics. My experience was that friends, colleagues and collaborators were immensely patient with the halting efforts of gay men, and especially gay socialists, to appreciate that we were fighting the same fight. In my view it is not just a strategic alliance that draws feminists and gay men together, but that, because of our histories, one issue cannot be comprehended properly without the other. In particular, Western societies will never cope adequately with sexual dissidence until they have coped with gender.

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