It was not so much love at first sight, just a continued overlap

A conversation with Lynne Segal
(24th April, 2025)

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LYNNE SEGAL is Professor Emerita of Gender and Psychosocial Studies, retiring from Birkbeck College (University of London) in 2020. She continues to publish widely, most recently on feminism, ageing and care, as well as to lecture regularly in the UK, Europe and elsewhere. Recent books include *Out of Time: The Pleasures & Perils of Ageing* (2013); *Radical Happiness: Moments of Collective Joy* (2017); *The Care Manifesto* (co-authored with the Care Collective, 2020); *Lean on Me: The Politics of Radical Care* (2023). She is currently addressing issues of radical friendships, love and solidarity, along with ways of working with many other Jewish anti-Zionists for peace in Israel/Palestine.

Ester Gendusa: How did you first encounter Cultural Studies? Was it 'love at first sight'?

Lynne Segal: I first encountered Cultural Studies in the 1970s through reading the work of Stuart Hall, who had accepted Richard Hoggart's invitation to start up a new Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham University, in 1964. This inaugurated what would soon prove the remarkable rise of Cultural Studies as a radical new cross-

disciplinary field of study, exploring the political dynamics of cultural formations at every level, both hegemonic and subcultural. I was looking at Hall's work because of my interest in the New Left, which formed the background to the movement politics I was engaged in from the 1970s, both within Women's Liberation and in broader community-based politics. There was a direct link between the New Left's emphasis on direct action and grass roots politics and feminist activism from the close of the 1970s. I would say that, like so many others, I was quickly enamoured with Hall's writing, and then of course with him, as soon as I met him. Wherever he went, people would gather around Stuart, like bees to a honeypot, which helped spread his views far and wide. In relation to Cultural Studies, it was not so much love at first sight, just a continued overlap between my thoughts about women's positionality in the world, and that of all other oppressed groups, and the work being done in what was fast emerging as a new broad, interdisciplinary field of study as it blossomed from the mid to late 1970s right up until the present.

Emanuele Monegato: How did you experience the porosity between the social ferment in 1970s/1980s England and the academic environment in Britain?

Lynne Segal: I began teaching at Enfield College of Technology (which later became Middlesex University) at the close of 1970, employed to teach Psychology. Always a part of political engagement beyond the academy, at that time each new decade brought exciting new possibilities in higher education. At work I was constantly challenging narrow theoretical framing and disciplinary boundaries of experimental psychology, rejecting its focus on individual behaviour, usually measured in artificial laboratory situations, hence ignoring the crucial significance of the socio-historical particulars of the subjects' lives outside laboratories. I began, instead, from the understanding that we are social beings from the outset, embedded in language, culture and diverse webs of power, all of which was disavowed in mainstream psychology. However, it was bedrock in the left feminist, anti-racist, Marxist milieu I now occupied, and tried to communicate. Such teaching was popular with most students since it morphed into whatever issues most engaged me, and often them, back then.

Politically reframed, for instance, and updating R.D. Laing, the concept of 'mental illness' could easily address women's startlingly higher rates of depression, while questioning their routine treatment with addictive benzodiazepines, marketed as "mother's little helper". Understandings of 'prejudice' shifted dramatically once no longer framed and measured as individual 'attitudes' but placed in the context of the still entrenched outcome of diverse histories of white colonialism, racism and discrimination, drawing in particular upon Frantz Fanon or Stuart Hall. From Fanon's classic *Black Skin, White Masks*, written in 1952, and soon an essential text in Cultural Studies, it was possible to think about the white world's perpetual debasement of the black world, woven into language itself. More complexly again, Stuart Hall introduced a cultural focus on raced identities as always situated, imagined and multiple. These broader understandings of our distinct sense of ourselves as inevitably affected by class,

ethnicity and gender meant moving across disciplines, vastly enriching our understandings of people's place in the world. Each topic was framed at every turn by the newly emerging landscapes of gender, still ludicrously reduced in my discipline to putative individual attributes known as 'sex differences' and tirelessly fought over by 'nature' versus 'nurture' brigades. Instead, in the classroom we all discussed the isolation and loss of status experienced by so many women who described themselves as "just a housewife", which was often at odds with their earlier hopes for greater engagement with the wider world.

Ester Gendusa: In what ways did you feel that you and other culturalist intellectuals were actively contributing to the transformation of Western interpretative paradigms in those years?

Lynne Segal: Political activists like me who were employed in higher education were first and foremost determined to bring our radical ideas into the academy. Hence, we focused precisely on those groups of people who had been generally overlooked because of their less privileged or outsider status. This included not just the experiences of women or ethnic minorities, but also the hitherto absent voices of the sick, the elderly or disabled, those in trouble with the law. They were usually merely the objects of study, rather than agents of their own lives, able to express their own needs for support and inclusion in any educational or cultural milieu. Conversely, once we developed our own new frameworks elaborating the complexity and contradictions of differing forms of subjectivity or belonging, we were eager to spread these new understandings to as wide an audience as possible. This meant that alongside teaching, for instance, I would be working with others helping to produce community papers, running a women's centre, or seeking out other public forums for discussion. With friends we would go to talk in schools, raising issues of equality and questioning societal expectations that limited the career paths and opportunities of certain groups of people, suggesting the diversity of paths that might be open to young people in the years ahead, whatever their identities or backgrounds. We always emphasised the significance of collective belonging and the need to respect and care for one another, especially across differences that tended to be seen hierarchically, through any traditional gender, racial or national framing.

Emanuele Monegato: How did it feel to be engaged, committed, and radical in that historical period?

Lynne Segal: I feel in many ways that my generation, often called the post-war "baby boomers" who came of age in the 1960s, were then a very lucky generation. In jobs in the 1970s and 1980s, especially in higher education, there was an increasing acceptance of radical political engagement and thought. It's true that we were often mocked by the mainstream media, yet we were the people making waves, offering something new in times that had not yet been affected by the austerity policies and rising anxieties that

began to emerge more strongly from the 1990s. Hence, for instance, while feminists were at first satirized, even in the liberal press, as angry, unlovable, "man-haters", our voices were soon offering up new words and concepts for discussion, whether in relation to "social harassment", "marital rape", the "housewife's lament", "cultural objectification", and much more. In short, it felt good to be radical in those years, even though I was often isolated within my own discipline of psychology. But, certainly, I had a sense that times were changing, and we were a part of that change, consciously engaging in the making of history, as the Marxist Victor Serge might say.

Ester Gendusa: In your view, what is the legacy of Stuart Hall and the experience of the CCCS, both in the UK and internationally?

Lynne Segal: One of Hall's main legacies was his insistence on mapping the historical conjuncture at any moment, always attentive to contesting forces of control and resistance. This, of course, is a framework he developed out of his distinct encounter with Antonio Gramsci. In the beginning, for Hall and Cultural Studies at CCCS in Birmingham, it meant tracing the challenges and ruptures in working class life and cultures—developing the work that Raymond Williams had done on culture as a "whole way of life" (Williams xvii) by adding the significance of signifying practices. But those engaged in early Cultural Studies were soon addressing each new hub of cultural dissidence as it emerged, whether from women, ethnic minorities, post-colonial resistance, sexual dissidence or any other areas of struggle. Hall, for instance, later recalled the emergence of women's liberation as one of the most contentious moments for Cultural Studies at Birmingham: "the personal lives of everyone there were knocked sideways" (Hall, personal communication), he would say. But the crux of Hall's legacy for all of us was his emphasis that we must always attend to the possibly shifting organization of power at any moment, combining the study of symbolic forms and meanings with the study of power. As he would later say: "However varied the appropriation becomes, I would hesitate to call it Cultural Studies if that element was not there" (Segal and Osborne 24). Today we often find new disciplinary fields, such as Media Studies or Film Studies, which draw upon Cultural Studies, but in increasingly diverse ways, which may or may not make that key link Hall insisted upon between symbolic representation, in whatever form, and structures of power.

Emanuele Monegato: What is your perspective on the future of Cultural Studies? Do you believe it remains a thriving field, or do you sense it is undergoing a scientific "dilution" that risks weakening its radical edge?

Lynne Segal: As Hall himself said, Cultural Studies itself has shifted with its different situational appropriations. When it emerged in the 1970s it was very much tied in with the radical politics of the time. But that radical politics itself receded, and with it some of the radicalism of Cultural Studies itself. So, as I've commented before, the theoretical ambitions of a now institutionalized discipline, still hoping to be cutting edge by linking

culture and power, bumped up against the challenges of cultural disillusion in the possibility of any overall political improvement. The allure of attending to the purely 'cultural', increasing evading both issue of the 'economic' and hence of a key dynamic of power, in my view weakened the political edge of Cultural Studies. Thus, for instance, by the 1990s, in an interview for the magazine *Radical Philosophy*, the post-colonial theorist Gayatri Spivak expressed despair over what she saw as the increasingly uncritical appropriation of Cultural Studies in the USA, reducing it to a matter of respecting cultural diversity and difference, which she saw as now itself doing the work of promoting US led, corporate capitalist interests in the new "*financialization* of the globe" (Spivak 166, emphasis in the original). Instead, she called for "a reconstellation of Marx's object of study" (Spivak 167) that analyses the neo-colonial situation as one where systematic economic restructuring, international sub-contracting and new forms of super-exploitation of women are thwarting any hopes for justice under capitalism in an intensified North-South divide (Spivak 168-169). I tend to agree that by the 1990s work within Cultural Studies often lacked a significant cutting edge.

Ester Gendusa: Do you feel that adopting 'the Stuart Hall Project' as a teaching method may allow young generations (of students and teachers) to be aware of interplay between language and political/institutional power?

Lynne Segal: I think that adopting 'the Stuart Hall Project' can indeed still entail paying attention to the ties between language and power, in all its institutional diversities.
Where I see it emerging most often today is in relation to thinking about identities and culture. Hall stressed the notion of the hybridity along with complexity in relation to black identities, and indeed, of course, to all identities, discussing their ties to sociopolitical and sociocultural and linguistic phenomena. The main point Hall always wanted to make is that we can't live without some sense of identity, but that identities are always plural, not reducible to some inner state of being, but an aspect of all that has been our positionality in the world. These ideas are all amplified and illustrated in John Akomfrah's excellent film, entitled *The Stuart Hall Project* (2013), which is narrated through Hall's archived audio interviews and television recordings. If you can get hold of this film, do watch it.

Emanuele Monegato: In what ways has the encounter with S. Hall influenced your life, personally and professionally?

Lynne Segal: Well, I was especially lucky since through my friendship with Catherine Hall (the feminist historian who was Stuart's wife) I became a personal friend of Stuart's as well, at times even helping to care for him in his final years of illness. This meant that for at least four decades my life was greatly enhanced by our contact. He was the very best of company, always, full of humour and expressing real care and concern for everyone he knew. His life touched so many people, and he was a mentor to all of us, especially those black scholars who have followed in his wake.

Professionally, Stuart Hall's thoughts influenced all my teaching and writing, and I sometimes had the good fortune to share a platform with him at political meetings. It is impossible to exaggerate how much Stuart meant to those who knew him well, or what a sorrow it has been to lose him. Fortunately, we have his ideas to build upon in our own thinking, and a wonderful model to try to live up to in how we relate to others in the world.

Ester Gendusa: In 1990, you published *Slow Motion. Changing Masculinities, Changing Men*, a foundational work that marked a watershed moment in the interdisciplinary study field on evolving masculinities. The introduction to the 1997 revised edition of the volume ended with an insightful reference to then 'battle to preserve masculinity' as opposed to the battle to change men. Three decades later, we are witnessing a resurgence of gender-based violence and gendered hate crime—reaching alarming proportions, particularly among younger generations and radicalised through new social media—alongside an international backlash against women's rights and gender equality. Do you feel that the hopeful battle for men's change has ultimately been lost, thus becoming a sinking ship that has pulled women down with it?

Lynne Segal: No, I don't think the battle to change ideas of men and masculinities to emphasise their potential for caring and egalitarian commitments has simply been lost, but there is indeed much for feminists and sexual dissidents to fear in the contemporary gender terrain. Many men have changed, and as I wrote in *Slow Motion* (1990), masculinity has never been displayed in any homogenous form across time and place, whatever the very significant pressure on men to conform to traditional ideas of manhood as self-assertive and autonomous. What I stressed in that book is that not all men are violent, or inclined to violence, even though they are more likely than women to be trained into and rewarded for 'acceptable' forms of physical violence. Above all, we know that in patriarchal ideology men were supposed to emerge as the dominant sex, the mantle of masculinity confirming men's power, especially over women or other men seen as somehow subordinate to straight, white men.

Given that so many men's lives are far removed from any exercise of power, what we have today, as you say, is an orchestration of men's anxieties, of their almost chronic fear of failure, by the emerging forces of the Right. Judith Butler writes about this so well, as in her recent book *Who's Afraid of Gender?* (2025), where she again reiterates the significance of gender diversity, while affirming trans rights, in the face of those insisting upon the eternal stability of sexual difference and aggressively policing all who disagree. Butler suggests that gender has become a phantasm, standing in for all the differing fears and anxieties surrounding sexuality and identity. Such fears are nowadays fanned and distorted by the political and religious right to secure their own support, in the process dismissing feminism and the claims of sexual minorities. Italian prime minister Georgia Meloni, for instance, apparently warned that gender ideology would strip everyone of their sexed identity, while the late Pope Francis described gender theory as an annihilating force that refused to recognize the order of creation.

In similar vein, Vladimir Putin suggests that gender is a western construct that will destroy the concepts of mother and father. Thus, more than ever today all progressive people, men and women alike, need to work together to resist these conservative forces trying to embed traditional gender hierarchies in the service of authoritarian and exploitative practices overall.

Emanuele Monegato: In your recent *Lean on Me. A Politics of Radical Care* (2023), you dedicated a whole chapter to contemporary educational politics, stigmatizing the substantial lack of critical thinking as a priority in teaching practices today. Do you believe that the adoption of a culturalist paradigm, in conjunction with a feminist critical lens, could help counteract such a trend? What might be done at school level?

Lynne Segal: The problem is all that lies behind the shifts in educational practices in terms of the underfunding of universities, and cuts to welfare and the public sector overall which may well interfere with the goal of emphasizing what is indeed the importance of culture in explaining and shaping human behaviour and society. As soon as they enter school, children begin to be assessed for what can be measured as their 'intelligence' and progressing through their schooling years they face ever more competitive grading. In *Lean on Me* (2023), as you say, I argued that it should be obvious that inclusive and supportive educational practices can help build a positive sense of self or young people's sense of agency and connection to others, in and outside of the classroom—whatever their distinct abilities or challenges. However, today's exam-oriented modes of teaching, attentive only to instrumental goals, are more likely to have the opposite effect, stigmatising or alienating those who feel neglected, or inadequate, and encouraging primarily an aspirational self-centredness in those hoping to secure good grades. Indeed, from the changes I've witnessed over the half century I spent in universities, it's become increasingly clear that inclusive, enabling teaching is almost the very reverse of dominant trends in all educational institutions today. With the ongoing attack on the very idea of education for its own sake, and with curricula increasingly geared to external goals and job markets, we not only get a lack of interest in or encouragement of independent critical thinking, but a tendency to downplay cultural analysis overall, for an emphasis on the concerns of markets at any moment in relation to what jobs are thought to be most available for young people. Those promoting a culturalist analysis, thus, have to contend with these forces, however much they are indeed needed to combat such pedagogic instrumentalism.

Ester Gendusa: Since the ideal target readers of this issue of *Altre Modernità* are prospective teachers of English studies in Italian high schools willing to adopt a culturalist analytical framework in their lesson plans, which publication among those you authored would you recommend to them? And why would you opt for that specific work?

Lynne Segal: Well, I think my political memoir *Making Trouble: Life and Politics* (2008) covers many of the ideas we are discussing here, and the pleasures and pitfalls of my own journey through higher education, and engagement in political life. Also, as we've covered, *Lean on Me: A Politics of Radical Care* (2023), addressing what is most basic to the human condition, our vulnerability and interdependence throughout our lives. *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men* (1990) has much to say about the ways in which conservative thinking likes to emphasise biological sexual difference at the expense of the realities of gender and sexual diversities of thought and action, especially in in its appeal to boys and men. *Out of Time: The Pleasures and Perils of Ageing* (2013) has much to say on our fears of ageing, which can begin to assault people from quite a young age, while *Radical Happiness: Moments of Collective Joy* (2017) addresses how, contrary to mainstream thinking, a sense of well-being and happiness is not just an individual attribute but can be nurtured or shrunk by public policies and practices. It also shows the shared joys we can derive from imagining and aiming for a better future. This remains, whether or not we get there.

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