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A poststructuralist who still believes in structures: Interview with John Allen

John Allen with Toby Bennett

Editor's note: This interview forms part of the special issue *What Was Cultural Economy?* The issue has its origins in a January 2020 symposium, held at City, University of London, marking two decades since Paul du Gay and Michael Pryke convened a 'Workshop on Cultural Economy' at the Open University in Milton Keynes. That earlier event culminated in the publication of the edited collection *Cultural Economy: Cultural Analysis and Commercial Life* (Du Gay and Pryke 2002). *What Was Cultural Economy?* collects responses to these founding moments in the field from a number of key figures, who each reflect on the relationship between conceptual clarification and their own academic histories. John Allen supervised doctoral work by both Du Gay and Pryke; the former attributes the term 'cultural economy' to his former supervisor. Here, Allen recalls the cross-disciplinary institutional environment of OU Social Sciences in the 1980s and 1990s, the influence of its distinctive model of developing teaching materials, and theoretical debates around the 'cultural turn'. The interview was conducted by Toby Bennett on 16 October 2020 by telephone. The transcript has been edited for clarity and length.

TB: Can you describe how you came to the Open University? And in those first few years, what was the institutional environment and intellectual milieu like at that time? What did social sciences, broadly speaking, look like from your perspective?

JA: I came to the OU in 1979 and I left in 2019. So I was there for exactly forty years. I was at Kent University, I did sociology and politics as my undergraduate degree and then went on to do a PhD around Marxist methodology, still within sociology, with Alan Swingewood at the LSE. Now, when the money runs out you look for a bit of teaching and apply for jobs and one of the jobs that I applied for was at the OU, as a Research Assistant. Linda McDowell, now Professor Emerita at Oxford, ran that project, which just happened to be in Geography. It was actually on property relations and landlords. There's an urban side to my background in sociology but I was also interested in housing partly because, separate to academia, I was involved in licensed squatting and setting up housing co-ops. And it was based in Hackney and Islington, which is where I lived, in a squat, so it was very convenient. At that time,

intellectually, what was shaping my ideas was Roy Bhaskar's (1975) early text on realism. I remember picking that up in Edinburgh. I was already working on realism because I was working on Marx's method and I thought Marx was a realist. Realism came into geography in a big way and Andrew Sayer translated a lot of realist ideas (cf. Sayer 1984). He was at Sussex, before he went to Lancaster. So Linda and I wrote and published around a realist interpretation of landlords and property relations (Allen 1983; Allen and McDowell 1989). I wouldn't say it was a bestseller! But it was part of my intellectual influence at that time.

I arrived in 1979 and Stuart Hall came in '79 or '80, then John Clarke and Allan Cochrane in Social Policy, Laurence Harris and Sue Himmelweit in Economics. So this was a concerted attempt to recruit new people. The search for replacement heads of department in Sociology and Economics coincided with that, so the resources were available to bring about change. I wasn't part of that recruitment drive, so I can't tell you why certain individuals, but I do recall that people were identified and head hunted on an informal basis. It was later that Doreen [Massey] came to the OU, I think in about '84. The others arrived in the early eighties and worked on the foundation course, D102: Introduction to Social Science, production on which began in 1980 and ran from 1983. Fortuitously, Linda allowed me to be involved in the module teams too. So I was then in at the deep end in a module team with Stuart and Laurence Harris and John Clarke and others. All of whom I'd been reading, up to that time. I'd read their work prior to meeting them. It was a pleasant shock. But quite frightening, to say the least!

That was an amazing course to work on. Not only because it was my first course and I was young – in academic terms! – but it was also the course that was called in by [Margaret] Thatcher's government, and Keith Joseph, for "Marxist bias".[1] The whole

[1] Sir Keith Joseph is widely understood to have been a key intellectual influence on the political programme that Stuart Hall dubbed "Thatcherism", translating ideas from the likes of Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman into speeches and policy. During his 1981-86 tenure as Secretary of State for Education he made efforts to increase marketisation in the university sector, to render research funding more accountable to quality assurance mechanisms, and to delegitimise social sciences (outside economics). On Joseph's scrutiny of the Open University, amid longer-running accusations regarding 'Marxist bias', see Weinbren (2015: 103-105).

course was pulled in and at one stage we thought we were going to lose the course. Keith Joseph particularly picked up on the Economics block in D102, because it treated the economy as a circuit: as production, distribution, consumption. Now, one name for that is just seeing the economy in a holistic way, that's all we were doing. But of course it was seen as "Marxist bias" because Marxists treated the economy as a whole, rather than just looking at a particular aspect from micro- or macro-economics, supply and demand, whatever. You could argue that by adopting a stance and taking the economy as a whole, you're already subverting something of the atomistic nature of neoclassical economics. So in one sense, of course, it's a Marxist perspective but we weren't teaching Marxism. Being holistic is not teaching the labour theory of value, for example. But he thought we should be teaching supply and demand – which we were! – but *within this framework*. We were well defended by our own external assessor, as just providing a perspective. But the Conservatives really went for us there. Thatcher had looked at us quite closely, so we heard, but – I don't know if this is true or not – while she was not impressed with what we were teaching, she was impressed with how cheaply we provided degrees, because basically we were producing degrees at scale. So we were teaching the wrong ideas, in her terms, but the actual teaching machine was the right kind, producing economies of scale. And we got away with it, fortunately!

I became a lecturer in '85, which was the year I think I started supervising Mike [Pryke], with Doreen. He was my first postgraduate. And I carried on developing courses, going into the eighties, with module teams in Geography: D205 Changing Britain, Changing World; D314 Restructuring Britain was where I was teaching for the first time about postindustrial society and I was interrogating what produces wealth, as it were. What's productive? There was an argument at that time that manufacturing was the engine of growth and services were just an add-on, a bit player, supporting manufacturing. So "postindustrial society" was trying to shift that argument. Liberal theorists like Daniel Bell (1974) talking about knowledge and information being centre-stage, rather than the making of things. So that was part of my interest. I was interested in services, the economy generally, I was interested in uneven development. But as I said, my background is sociology and politics, so I was

at home in Sociology debates as much as I was within Geography debates. Later on, early nineties – exactly the same time when Paul [du Gay] was doing his PhD – there was a really significant course called Understanding Modern Societies, D213, which all four *Modernity* books came under. It was hosted by Sociology but again it was interdisciplinary in terms of who was writing on it. It had David Held on, who taught Politics, Vivienne Brown from Economics, people like me – I wrote chapters on Fordism, post-Fordism, post-industrialism, how discourses of industry excluded certain services at that time. That then got turned on its head, in a sense, on the next course I worked on, which I chaired from 1992-95 if I remember rightly, called The Shape of the World [D215]. Now, Stuart wrote on that course and he wrote about culture and place, nation, hybridity, identity and diaspora. So Stuart coming into Geography, me going into Sociology, it's all part of that intellectual exchange. You learn from it, in a way that you couldn't possibly do if you were just lecturing on your own. So that gives you a feel for how the cross-fertilisation of ideas all comes from working on course teams. And it's part of my intellectual development. I don't know if it's part of Stuart's, necessarily, but it's certainly part of mine because I was just a boy when I arrived at the OU, a boy of 28, so I was the one that was learning more than anything else.

From the mid-eighties to the early 2000s, I worked on something like eight or nine modules. Each module, at that time, took two to three years to produce. Because what you don't see was that there was a study guide of about 5000 words, and TV programmes – some of the courses, there'd be twelve TV programmes – radio programmes, audio cassettes, all with that book, which also talked to the same sets of ideas. It's a huge undertaking. Because that's the significance of working at the OU. One of the things that you think about is "what's the best medium to get across a particular idea?" So you don't do the same thing in written words that you do on TV, or radio. Radio works very well for focusing on a single idea. A lot of our students, in those early days, were putting the radio programmes or cassettes on in their car. The same applies for TV: you're dealing with images and representations. Often it works better to get across the lived experience of an idea you've just written about. The team had to think about how all these different components of a module

go together, the relationship, in teaching terms, between all these different chunks, as it were. So you get that cross-fertilisation, not only in ideas but in how you teach, by producing, sometimes, four or five books a course, TV programmes, audio and so on, which is very different from, kind of, writing up your lecture notes. So it's not just the ideas.

TB: I don't know that much has been written on the course team model but it comes up quite a lot in passing as quite a unique environment. So could you talk a bit more about how that happens? The process of turning cutting-edge ideas into a format that is appropriate for teaching undergraduates at a distance. What does that look like, in a room, over however long it takes?

JA: "Course teams" later became "module teams".[2] The point is that they're greater than the sum of their individuals. It's interdisciplinary in the first level Foundation courses and also in different courses in Sociology, Politics, Economics, Psychology and Geography. I think Geography and Sociology were probably the two most interdisciplinary, in the sense that they had people from different disciplines working on them. So you picked up things from each other that otherwise you would never have got. Every module team at that time, apart from support workers, would be probably between eight and ten central academics. You know, in one room. Which is quite large! You don't want larger than that. And these were all people with exclusive focus on this particular module at that point in time. OK, they're doing other things, they're doing their research and the rest of it. But this was our teaching as central academics. We'd have part-time tutors in various parts of the country which are quite separate and we were the central academics. Right across the country you had these part-time teachers and that's the face-to-face element with our students. So the students never see me at the centre. The face they see is their part-time tutor up in Aberdeen, up in Manchester, down in Cornwall. But we wrote to teach. And we were helping each other.

[2] For consistency, "module teams" is adopted from here on in although in places this leads to anachronism.

When you work on module teams, you have lots of meetings. It was once every two weeks, over two or three years, to discuss each others' drafts and pick up ideas about what other people are doing. You'd write three drafts and each draft, for every individual, would be discussed in the team. Which is a pretty frightening experience where you're the young academic and you've got the likes of Stuart in the room, and the rest of it. I was writing on race and class in the Sociology department, even though I was in the Geography discipline. Which was a bit difficult for me, given that Stuart was on the course too! What I wrote was actually awful in the first instance but eventually you get there and you cut your teeth on these things. Actually, it was recognised that you were learning as you went. But it's a very supportive environment, it was never competitive. You never got put down if you got it wrong. The nature of the comments were about trying to make the draft better, not to undermine you. Which is different from the academic criticism you often get at conferences and other things, where people point out where they think you're wrong. This was quite the opposite. You would say "it's better this way; you could express it this way; I'm not sure this idea works in the way you said it", those kind of comments. And they'd try to show you how you might go about it. Obviously, in the early days, in the eighties, I was the least experienced member; later on, by the time I was supervising Paul and Mike, I was more experienced. You pick it up and you pass on these kinds of ideas. By the time Paul was writing on Culture, Media and Identities, he had picked up a lot of these things, partly from being on module teams but also from being part of the intellectual debate at the OU.

And one thing I learned from colleagues in that teaching model was: you don't just teach your research, you translate it. I'd watch Stuart and others translate their ideas for students. Essentially, watch how they managed to simplify ideas without making them simplistic and develop an argument cumulatively, without repetition. Stuart taught Althusser's notion of interpellation to first years, to get them to understand ideology. He didn't just state it. He didn't just put it down on paper. He'd give a first take on it, a first cut; then come back at it from a different angle; then come back at it again, to reinforce it without repeating himself. And I watched how, to get a complex idea across, you didn't make it simple. Students have to, before they got

confident about writing, they'd have to go over it a number of times. I also made a point, early in my OU career, of becoming a part-time tutor for the Open University, to teach the course, just to see how it came across. You become much more aware of a student who's reading it. I used to ban the phrase "this is a complex idea". If you tell a student it's a complex idea, all you get back in their essay is "this is a complex idea". You've been lazy, in teaching terms. You have to say *why* it's complex and unpack the complexity. And when you're writing it, you can do that in different ways, so you take students with you. You didn't say "oh it's really just about hailing someone, interpellation." You took your time. Probably an idea like that might take 500 to 1000 words to get across, with illustrations, and coming back again to reinforce what you've said without repeating yourself in an obvious way. Now, to get to that stage would've taken three drafts, with a number of people commenting and helping on how that could work. Simple questions: someone will say "shall we teach this?" Someone in the team will respond, saying "why do students need to know that?" And if you can't answer that question, you don't teach it. So it's fairly fundamental. And Stuart got comments like everyone else: what worked, what didn't work, are you saying too much? And some would be very extensive comments. A common mistake academics made at the OU to begin with is you say too much too quickly. You can actually say very little, in terms of ideas, but it's actually spelling them out slowly. So in terms of writing, it changes your style. That's all part of that cross-fertilisation, not just in ideas but in ways of teaching. And it shaped how I became an academic because when I did conferences, or talks at other universities, I'd always be thinking "has that been understood?"

TB: That cross-disciplinary translation in those spaces, almost like a workshopping format, seems to be quite foundational. The rich crossover between communicating complex ideas to students and actually conducting research itself is particularly interesting. In the second edition of the Walkman book, Paul's introduction talks about how it was taken up and received as if it were a research text, as a book of original ideas, rather than a textbook.

JA: That translation was at two levels. I've been talking about how you translate ideas for students, in terms of how one takes one's time, how one's cumulative without

being repetitive, how one simplifies without making it simplistic. But there's also a translation that goes on for each other, within the team, because we're all inclined to use short-hand, for each other. You don't use short-hand for students but for each other. And again there was a generosity within the module team. We all believed in the OU, you know, so we all supported each other and were generous with each other. And that made a huge difference, because we were supporting the idea of what the Open University stood for. Only because we had time! Time was a key resource for us. These meetings would go on all morning or afternoon. Sometimes they were all day – you come out exhausted! We tried to bring the best out of each other. You had to translate for each other: if you're putting down a set of ideas, you have to convince your colleagues this is worthwhile to teach. And to do that you had to translate it for each other. For an economist, a sociologist, a geographer or whatever.

From that module team model, of working together, we actually took that, within Geography, into research. It's an unusual instance, because normally you get, you know, people say "how does your research work in terms of teaching?" So I was part of something called the South East programme and that was interdisciplinary (cf. Allen et al. 1998). We applied to the ESRC for six separate grants under a programme and we got five of them – the only one we didn't get was Nigel Thrift, who wasn't at the OU, he was at Bristol at that time. So it ended up five geographers from the OU – Doreen Massey, Allan Cochrane, people like that – all working on different aspects: some the economy, some culture, some politics. But we took our working model from the module team. So my role was working on the contract services, on the likes of security, cleaning, that kind of stuff. I was looking at the so-called unskilled work, within the City. Linda McDowell was working on masculinity – sometimes we'd be at the same banks in the City, same big buildings like the Lloyds building, and we used to joke that she'd be upstairs interviewing the bankers and I'd be downstairs interviewing the security guards. But we treated it like a module team by transferring the team model into research. Doreen and I also edited a book in the late 1990s, *Human Geography Today* (Massey, Allen and Sarre 1999), which came out of our department. We actually edited that book within the department –

brought in people from outside but treated it exactly like a module team. When people wrote the chapters, we'd see it as a first draft and we'd comment on that draft just like a module team would and make them go through three drafts. Which some of them didn't really like! We were so persuaded by the usefulness of the module team that we used it for an edited collection.

TB: It would be good to talk a little about supervisions. What were the rhythms of supervision like? Was there much of a "research culture" in which students were embedded? Would they teach or be involved in curriculum design?

JA: There's no undergraduates on the campus at Milton Keynes but there's a lot of postgrads, right across faculties. You've probably got more chance of meeting a science postgrad there than you would in lots of contemporary universities. There's some weaknesses there. The academics weren't there all the time, apart from for the module team, and the postgrads couldn't teach first years, or take seminars, so you had to get them a separate job. Some did teach, as a part-time tutor, but it was a separate contract. It wasn't part of what they did, which is a shame really.

Mike was doing work on the City of London. Doreen and I treated the supervision as quite structured. It wasn't a case of "go away and read", it was quite tightly disciplined and we always managed to get people through in four years. And probably that discipline also came from our module teams: you have to produce at a certain point in time, if you're writing three drafts they have to be here at this time because everyone's got to read it. You can't say "I couldn't do it this week". To make sure that someone finished their PhD, you would set them to write papers straight away, continually asking them to write. That's a model I sustained right the way through my career, every one of my postgrads completed in four years. So it wasn't about me just letting them go away and read widely and then think about it. Of course, you would read widely to start with and at different stages. But Doreen and I, with Mike – we'd always team teach, joint supervisions. Paul was slightly different. Paul was in Sociology and I became Paul's joint supervisor, I think, after year one or year two. Graeme Salaman was the first supervisor and then I joined. By the time I was supervising Paul – end of the eighties, early nineties – I was already steeped in

thinking about services but he came at it from quite a different perspective, around consumption and the self and utility. Which actually, because of my background, and the debates that were going round, those conversations were actually shaped by some of those earlier debates in the module team. But I never team taught with Graeme, it was always separate. I suspect Paul had different sets of conversations around management with Graeme and more discursive, poststructuralist with me.

It's an atrocious process, the PhD. The loneliness of the PhD writer is awful, really. You're on your own with your writing, apart from your supervisors, you can't explain these things to your friends. And for four years you're writing on something very small but you have to be able to sustain an interest in it. So it's no good the supervisor imposing and saying "you should do your thesis on this", they have to have an interest in it. In both Paul and Mike's case, they chose their topics and we helped them shape how they'd go about that. Much later, when I was Head of Department, we increased our number of postgrads and I had a line: Wednesday, you come in. I would insist that they turned up at seminars and be part of a research culture because that's the way they'd learn – from each other. So you had more of a research culture because the postgrads turning up would oblige the central academics to turn up, because they were their supervisors. Intellectually, they would all get stuff from discussions with each other, from other seminars, from just being around and having coffee with people, students from other disciplines. That research culture comes with exactly the same kind of dynamics that I was talking about in terms of the module team: the way in which ideas cross and fertilise through a seminar, in a department itself. So in that sense it became similar to elsewhere.

TB: What kind of debates and events were shaping those internal conversations at the time? You mentioned coming from realism, Bhaskar, Sayer but moving towards poststructuralism – you know, in some contexts that could provoke some heated debates!

JA: Funnily enough, realism didn't come into the debates within the module teams that much. Doreen was a realist but she didn't write on realism. I wrote on realism.

Doreen, Andrew Sayer and myself wrote together at different times. Andrew's a good friend and remains a good friend. But the cultural turn damaged realism, intellectually, for me. Because I found that the way that realism treated objects was useful in terms of thinking about what something is and what it isn't. What are its core qualities, what are its secondary qualities, that sort of thing. It didn't seem to work for culture. And I thought "whoops, what's going on here?" Culture doesn't seem to work very well in realism, so far as I can see; it becomes a bit clunky. So I kind of drifted away from realism, in the Bhaskar sense, partly because of the cultural turn.

Realism taught me that you can move across different fields, depending on what it is you're trying to explain. I try to think, for whatever the subject I'm looking at, "what intellectual concepts and ideas are most useful to understanding it?" In the *Cultural Economy* book I was trying to work out what an expressive form of knowledge might look like, in the cultural turn, and finding that other people, like John Urry, were less useful in helping me with that kind of thinking (Allen 2002). So I wrote on Ernst Cassirer but that's the only time I've ever done that. I've written elsewhere, with Mike, on Georg Simmel (Allen and Pryke 1999); I've written on my own about Siegfried Kracauer, on his phenomenological appreciation of city culture, that kind of stuff (Allen 2007). But only when it's appropriate to the object under discussion. So trying to work out what services were and why they were seen as unproductive, or how they were constructed, came out of a way of thinking from realism. Thinking about the conceptualisation of something, how you become conceptually precise about what something is, was always a challenge. And taking an object like services, you could use that kind of realist mindset I'd developed to think that through. But when you're thinking about the discourse of services, the meaning and representation of services, I didn't find that actually very useful.

The conversations that went on in module teams worked partly because we're all in a similar intellectual space. Less so Economics but Politics, Sociology and Geography were in a similar space. The cultural turn at the OU very much came from Stuart's way of thinking around meaning and representation, which Paul picked up. There are

other versions of the cultural turn but that's the kind of cultural turn that went into geography. We were influenced, in Geography, by pretty much the same things that were influencing sociology at the time. We were trying to think through space in social relationships, not just adding on space to sociology, which was my criticism of the Lancaster School. Obviously, *Economies of Signs and Space* (Lash and Urry 1994) came up but I tended to see Lancaster as sociology-plus-space. They didn't integrate it enough. In Geography we were into a nice, strong relational turn. The relationality came from Doreen Massey, she's the central person there. The book we edited that came out in the late 1990s was an explicitly poststructuralist form of geography. We didn't try to persuade the likes of Stuart that space was the most important thing but it came up in the conversations, obviously, through the modules. Particularly in the foundation courses. The cultural turn was obviously more important for sociology but poststructuralism and social construction were important for both. So we were all pretty much – in Sociology and Geography – poststructuralists. Although some of us were poststructuralists who still believed in structures. One lives the contradiction!

So the conversations I would have with Paul, for example, would've been around the cultural turn, poststructuralism, Foucault, discourse, performance, practice. With Mike I talked about social construction and Actor Network Theory. Foucault was significant, Edward Saïd too. Funnily enough, Deleuze didn't really figure much. That was later. But discourse and performance would translate into Paul's work. The discourse of services: he would talk about the performance of service workers and I would be thinking about the discourse of industry and how that excluded services as unproductive. So we'd have these exchanges on social construction, which was very much part of Paul's thinking, and that came out of, not just Foucault but ANT – which was bigger in Geography than it was in Sociology at that time, partly because of the nature-culture reference, which was very significant for geographers. So Latour and Callon were actively discussed in our module courses in Geography. We didn't tend to take that so much into other courses. Callon a bit; Mike was keen on Callon. Whether that came up in Culture, Media and Identities, I don't know, I wasn't

part of that module team. Most of what I'm talking about is what was going on within Geography.

TB: You've mentioned the influence of Stuart and Doreen. She's written that they would drive together from North London to Milton Keynes and have conversations in the car (Massey 2000). That's another space of exchange, I suppose. Did *Marxism Today* and the "New Times" project inflect much of this? From the outside it seems like part of the same package.

JA: I'd forgotten about the cars! Yeah, because Stuart always drove and Doreen tended to go up with Stuart, she was in that part of London. Sometimes I'd take Doreen, sometimes I'd get a lift with Laurence Harris. And it's over an hour journey, so of course you're going to start talking about that day. Particularly on the way back, what happened in the module team meeting, and it would go on. You were basically sifting and sorting your thoughts, in the car with other people, on what happened that day. Trying to work out what exactly went on, what did that mean, kind of stuff. But I'd forgotten about that side of it. Because you didn't have to go to work every day, those car journeys, or train journeys, always – not always – could often have an intellectual side to them.

I was reading *Marxism Today*, obviously. For those writing in it, it was obviously a political project in itself. But what interested me about *Marxism Today*, it wasn't that you'd put those debates into teaching materials but you had people writing there who could write! So the Hobsbawms, the Stuarts, the Doreens. I came across a piece quite recently of Doreen's, which I remember her writing in *Marxism Today* before she arrived at the OU, called "The Shape of Things to Come" (Massey 1983). It was about changes in the labour markets across the UK. And usually that's dry and boring but she wrote about it in such an interesting way, showing not just that this was happening in some regions and not others but why it made a difference that it was happening up north as to down south. So we weren't translating *Marxism Today* into teaching materials, it was just another influence. Some of the stuff just sparked ideas for you and then you would pick that up. It's funny, you're picking up influences both from Foucauldian tracts, like *Archaeology of Knowledge*, something

dense like that, and then you'd also be reading "The Forward March of Labour Halted" (Hobsbawm 1978) or Doreen's piece on labour market changes in *Marxism Today*. You pulled your influences from lots of different things.

TB: I'm interested in the administration and management side in the eighties and nineties – for the faculty and the management of module teams and so on. The Cultural Economy "project", if you like, is being forged at the same time that there's these enormous shifts in Higher Education. Paul was writing about New Public Management and those broader shifts (e.g. Du Gay 1993) amid all of the institutional atmosphere that you've described, the pressures that were placed from above and the loyalties that mobilised you. I'm also thinking of something that Stuart said, about how the OU was filled with "good social democrats" but on a managerial level it was entrepreneurial, full of appraisal forms, mission statements, cost centres and calculations and so on (Hall 1993). So there was somehow a disconnect where, whatever the commitments, practice was shaped by this regulatory apparatus. Is that how you would describe it?

JA: I think I was certainly aware of the external context in teaching and also in research. During the period that we're talking about, the RAE came into existence. So the first time we were ever assessed for research, there were some people in some departments who hardly published anything, in research terms. That changed dramatically with the RAE. But the way we tended to see it in Geography – I can't speak for Sociology – was actually that you tried to turn whatever was out there to your advantage. So if you could get grants on certain things that would fit within what you wanted to do, you would try to use the funds but actually, you'd think about how that fits into the research culture of the discipline as a whole, rather than just leaving it down to individuals to do what they want. So we would try to take whatever external pressures there were and use them to our advantage. That would be the way I summarise what we tried to do. So we always did the research we wanted to do but we did it in a framework that wasn't necessarily one of our choosing, you can put it that way.

One of the shifts we all went through at that time, exactly as Paul was writing about it, was students as consumers. Most of the academics didn't agree with that, we came out of a view that this wasn't a good that you'd purchased. You may be consuming it but you weren't buying it. And we resented that – but you'd push back, in a sense, against the management. It depends at different times on who the vice chancellor was. Some VCs responded to that model, wanted to push it further – partly because they didn't have much choice a lot of the time, given changes from central government – but some also resisted it more and it would depend very much on who was VC at that time. You have to live within the frameworks being imposed by central government but you tried to make the best within that, would be my view. You don't just slavishly interpret it. The OU is a massive machine. It's enormous. The OU is bigger than any other university in terms of what it's trying to manage. The number of students it has, it's bigger by far than any other university in the UK. D102, the foundation course, in the first years of its life, had an average of between ten and twelve thousand students a year. And it lasted for eight years. So that gives you a sense of the numbers that you're teaching. That particular module, I suspect taught anything up to 100,000 students. Nowhere else in UK education would you have the privilege of teaching so many students. So you'd have all these pressures around students as consumers but it wasn't part of the ethos, if I can put it that way, of what we actually did. It wasn't about just getting bums on seats. Student numbers were obviously important at university level, right at the centre, because that's how the machine reproduces itself. But in Aberdeen, on a wet Tuesday night for a tutorial with three people? No.

Coming closer to what you were saying about the disjuncture that Stuart acknowledged… We were all on the Left, all believed in the OU as a kind of social democratic experiment in mass education. It was very much a Left project, an experiment which we all believed in, more than anything. And we were teaching to a mass audience. People at a distance in the regions as well as on campus. And the part-time tutors – I'm generalising terribly but they believed in the OU in the same way that I believe in the OU and what it stands for. The essays would go through the machine for assessment but the first port of call for the student would be the part-

time tutor. And they were dealing with, you know, “the University of the Second Chance”: students who’d left school early without qualifications, all that kind of stuff. The fact it was “open” meant you didn’t have to have qualifications to go. They were more than sympathetic, politically, to teaching that group of people. It was a huge thing for all of us in those early days – the 1980s, and the 1990s to a certain extent – in all the module teams I worked on. Because we were all committed to the Open University as a political project, we wanted it to work.

The module team chair – which Stuart was, on a number of courses, but particularly on Understanding Societies – that was a huge role. That’s separate from the discipline and the university. You’re managing the actual module team over a two or three-year period, producing it plus a year in its first year of presentation. So it’s a huge role where you’re managing this team, not only of academics but also TV producers from the BBC, people from the regions, you also had full-time administrative support specifically for your module team. And then, as well as central academics the chair’s got to deal with, in the early days, something like twelve, thirteen regions. So it was something that had to be organised quite rigidly. I’ve already mentioned you’re producing three drafts which have to be read by the course team and there’s a definite date where that’s got to be done by. You’re really writing to order and it’s hard! Because you can do the best you can but you can’t always get it the way you want it. That’s why you have three drafts. Not everyone was that ordered. So your role as module team chair would be very much trying to shape that. It’s a mixture of being quite harsh but also being persuasive, because you’re working quite closely with each other. It’s a big job, being a module team chair. To organise and manage that, you’ve got to be… You need your actor-network stuff! You have to know how to, not just persuade people but you need very ordered systems.

The OU, as I say, is a massive machine and I’m more sympathetic to having an accounting model, to put it that way. I believe, as an academic, in that kind of academic service. When you become an established academic – basically an old academic – you do more management at university level. You do your teaching, your

research, but you also sustain the institution. And you can do that at discipline level, faculty level, or university level, depending on what stage you're at in your career. It's part of what you should do, working for the whole. I was more sympathetic to that stuff than perhaps Stuart was. Stuart never became Dean – he became Head of Department and a module team chair within the faculty, so he would experience those pressures but not at university level. He would experience it within the faculty. I don't think it was where he wanted to go, in any sense, and to be honest he was better used elsewhere, obviously. Same with Doreen. Doreen was Head of Department for about six months and it didn't suit her. Never became Dean, never took other managerial or administrative roles. After the Geography department's RAE success, I became the Deputy Chair of the university's research committee, and I was that for ten years. Basically, the deputy to the pro-VC of research. And that was a lot of work but it was still within research. After I was made a Professor in 2000 a lot of my institutional time was taken up with managing the discipline. I was involved in the university research management side of things and I was Head of Department between 1997 and 2003. When you enter into being Head of Department you do it for a reason. You want to shape that particular department, in terms of its research culture and its teaching. But it takes time. It takes you away from – it took me away from the Cultural Economy workshop, for example, so I was a peripheral figure to the actual event itself. You can't spread yourself everywhere.

TB: Paul has attributed the term "cultural economy" to you. Would you apply it to what you were doing around the same time? Or retroactively?

JA: I've got a vague memory of why that came about because it was in relation to his thesis. One of the things we were talking about, and was in my head, was, "we all know what political economy is and you're not doing that!" And it just became a way of labelling what Paul was doing, in a sense, in relation to political economy. Of course, Adorno's work, cultural industries – it's been around for a long time in the arts and culture sectors, in that fairly standard cultural policy-oriented way. "Cultural economy" can refer to lots of things. It was really just a tag that Paul and I agreed on, that worked for him. So I was surprised when he acknowledged that because he didn't need to. It was just me helping out in the supervision. As far as I'm concerned,

it's their term not mine. I wouldn't describe myself as doing "cultural economy", in the way that Paul would have. I came out of that general Marxist background of thinking about industry as production, circulation, that kind of stuff. I was thinking about the service economy in the South East, in London, and finance, and I started realising that the debate within economics and geography was "producer services" and "consumer services" and that was it. So I was trying to take that further and say that's not good enough because that just sees industry as central: "producer services are services that help assist manufacturing, which is the source of growth". No one thinks that now. You hear the talk, on BBC News, of the UK as a service economy and they assume that's the source of wealth. You go back twenty, thirty years, they didn't. You wouldn't have been able to talk confidently about the UK being a "service economy", in terms of where our wealth comes from. People would say "you can't have a nation of hairdressers" – that was actually said! Or shopkeepers – "where would the wealth come from?" Well, of course, that's true in a sense but services, even at that time, were so much more than hairdressing and shopkeeping. It was a way of putting it down. Part of the thinking was, "what the hell is the City of London doing?" And finance and business services being so important. Are they just merely sideshows to manufacturing? Clearly they weren't. Or are they servicing the international economy?

Those are the questions that were driving me and the work I was doing, that way of thinking. I was doing more than thinking about discourses of services and representations of service industries. I was thinking about the nature of industry and when the question came up of, "what is the discourse of services, why is it seen as unproductive?" That was useful for me. But I didn't need to use the term "cultural economy" to make sense of it. It became useful because of the cultural turn, so it allowed you to talk about representations and discourses of industry and economy. That's really where it came from for me, in that sense. We've come a long way with the discourse of services and I think that's a legacy of part of that way of thinking. If there hadn't been a cultural turn, I don't know if we'd have got to cultural economy. It was never a cultural turn on its own, it was always mixed up with poststructuralism. We put the two together. It's surprising how poststructuralist our

thinking is in the contemporary climate, compared to some of the generalisations and universals that were talked about in the fifties and sixties, going back a long time. We really are interested in the particular now, in a way that we take for granted. And that's the shift – a cultural shift, the discursive shift. We wouldn't even bother to call it "poststructuralist". I think I said earlier, because I'm an old academic, I'm probably a poststructuralist who believes in structures.

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