

## FORMATIONS OF SELF AND SOCIETY 1943- 73 : A CONVERSATION WITH CYNTHIA COCKBURN

### Introduction

2008 was forty years after the student uprisings which caused a storm in the teacups of the political establishment across the world. The anniversary was an occasion for that generation, *my* generation, to take stock, to look back at the conjuncture and consider how it had shaped our politics and subsequent lives. As someone who had been a student in the early sixties but had dropped out and become part of what became known as the 'underground' counter culture in London, I felt somewhat ambivalent about this spate of 'memory work', most of it produced by ex student activists who had gone on to become established academics. Perhaps understandably their accounts ignored anything that was not happening in the universities. One of the motivations in writing my memoir, **Reading Room Only** was to correct this bias, and insist that there was other stuff going on, including the squatting movement in which I was involved, that should be included in the public record.

A friend and colleague of mine, Nora Rathzel, with whom I had collaborate on a joint research project into young people's narratives of place in Hamburg and East London (**Finding the way home**) and who had been very active in left wing politics and the women's movement in West Germany during the 60's and 70's set up a reminiscence group to bring together a range of people who, in different ways, had become radicalised in and by the 60's, to explore areas of commonality as well as difference. One member of the group was Cynthia Cockburn, who is a leading feminist, pacifist and gay activist, as well as being a freelance researcher and writer. I first met her when she did a book about Youth Training for a series I edited for Palgrave in the 1980's (**Youth Questions**).

Nora invited me to join the 68 reminiscence group and suggested that Cynthia interviewed me. The interview took place in Cynthia's house, over two sessions in the Spring of 2006. An edited version of the first session is reproduced below.

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CYNTHIA think what we need to do is to get the main points in your life and what was happening in the outside world. And then take chunks of it one at a time. At the Sigtuna meeting of the group most of us were talking about family and culture of origin, becoming political; and a lot of us went on to look at what institutional preferences or affiliations we were making, what did we join or didn't we join, and what kinds of cultures were shaping those choices. What were the significant concepts floating around in our environment? How were we thinking about what we were doing. And then there was a bit about today looking back, but not much—we didn't really get on to too much of that. There was emphasis on the significance of external trends and events, that was 1979 and Thatcher, 1968, 1974. But in Chile an important date was '73... and things like that.

We were placing an emphasis on class, race and sex gender, all the way through. Varieties of Left, varieties of feminism, varieties of revolution, really.

PHIL Well, if you want to start with the time: I was born in January 1943, so I was a war baby. We lived in Central London, very near Euston Station, so it really was a target for bombing.

The first significant event in my life related to that. When I was about eighteen months I was evacuated down to South Wales, to my grandmother—without my mother: I was just taken down there and dumped with this rather cold, austere person, and I became quite ill, and eventually my mother came and took me back. I think I'd got quite scared of these flying bombs—in 1944 there were these flying bombs coming over—and I think I probably picked up on my mother's panic—she was a rather panicky person. So I was very much a War baby.

CYNTHIA It seems you were terribly young for her to be thinking that you were scared of the bombs and would be more harmed by them than by leaving her.

PHIL Yes, I think she'd grown up at a time and in a culture where the model of motherhood was not very much influenced by psychological understanding of infant experience or issues of attachment, separation and loss. And in any case she was shaped by her experience of her own mother, who came from a very large family, so she didn't get much close mothering herself. Still I've never been able to quite work out why it was that she thought it was a good idea to just leave me with her own mother, whom she didn't get on with, anyway. No doubt it was rationalised that because I was frightened this would be a safer place to be.

CYNTHIA So you were evacuated to your grandmother who was not a total stranger.

PHIL It's just that she wasn't a very motherly sort of person. I think when you're eighteen months you probably need some sort of human warmth and holding. And if you're just sort of plonked down there and you don't get that, then you really don't know quite what's going on.

So that was probably the first impingement of an external event, namely the war, which I think probably has had the most effect on my subsequent life.

CYNTHIA Are you putting some things that developed later down to it ...?

PHIL Oh, I think so, undoubtedly. I mean, I think my life has been overwhelmingly shaped by that event.

CYNTHIA Insecurity due to separation?

PHIL Well, yes, all sorts of things. I mean, at that age you experience the world very much through your body, your senses, – it's a body memory. So, for example, today if a car horn goes, I jump, because it reminds me of the sirens. The thing about flying bombs, of course was the silence: you knew when they were close when the engine cut out. So if you could hear the engine, in a way you were safer. It was when the engine cut out that you knew you were in danger – a lethal silence, if you like ... Of course, as a baby you were only aware of noise and silence. And I really have to reconstruct this, but I've remained extremely sensitive to the issue of noise and sounds.

CYNTHIA Alarm noises.

PHIL Yes And that silence may portend extreme danger and death, not calm or peace. That certainly was the first external event that impinged. And then I grew up in a block of flats in Upper Woburn Place, just opposite where the bus exploded at 7/7, actually. My father still lives there, fortunately he wasn't there at the time. But anyway, it was an odd place to grow up, because there were no children—it was all business people living in this block of flats.

My first introduction to the geography of social class was when they decided to send me to this private preparatory school. Although we weren't very well off—my dad was a young doctor, my mum was a nurse, they made enormous sacrifices to send me to this snobby little prep school in Eaton Square, which was on the other side of town, in Chelsea. The alternative was to go to Argyle Street school in King's Cross; my parents used to threaten if I didn't do well at my prep school I'd end up there, where all these 'nasty, rough children' were.

And I could see the 'nasty, rough children' playing from the back of my flat. I was extremely envious of them because you could see them doing these extraordinary things I knew nothing about, running around and playing and generally carrying on; they built a block council flats opposite us and we were on the seventh floor, so I could look down and see everything that was going on. I was living in my rather private fantasy world where there were no other real children, though plenty of imaginary companions, including monsters.! So the 'other side of the street', the people who lived on the other side of the tracks, has always both a source of fear and fascination for me.

The school they sent me to was, again, a rather odd place. All the children there were from very well off backgrounds – their parents were in the Diplomatic Corps, they all lived around Sloane Square, and stuff like that. I was the poor little boy who was also very clever, which was obviously not a good combination. So I got rather badly bullied. I ended up being in a class of, ten-year-olds when I was about eight, and I was coming top at everything. So this didn't endear me to the other children, a too clever by half little Jewish swot....

CYNTHIA Was it boys-only?

PHIL Yes, it was a boys-only prep school ... We lived at a tiny flat and these people all had very big houses. I remember going to this house and they had flunkeys. they actually had people in livery, serving at table. And I remember they had this bowl of water, and I didn't know what it was, so I started to drink it and they said, 'No, no, no, it's for your fingers, dear!' So I was around people who had three lots of knives and three lots of forks and lived in this very different world.

So I became acutely aware of these sorts of distinctions. And also my parents were very political in a rather strange way. Because, although I didn't make the connection at the time, my dad came from a very radical Jewish socialist, background. The family story that was always told about my grandfather, my father's father, was that he slept between a photograph of Lenin and a photograph of Kropotkin and never had a bad night's sleep, which I think must have been a fiction, but it's a nice story!

My grandfather had to get out of Russia because (a) he was an anarchist and (b) he was Jewish, which was a dangerous combination in those times. And like many of them, he'd been aiming for New York but couldn't afford the fare and got off at Glasgow. So he was part of that Jewish diaspora that landed in Britain ...

Yes, that's my father's father. So my father grew up in this radical environment. His father sold blankets door-to-door to the Lanarkshire coalminers. But apparently he was more interested in selling his socialist tracts than selling blankets! He was terrible at business. So my dad grew up in a very political, left wing environment. He went to Socialist Sunday school, he heard Jimmy Maxton, John McLean and the other great socialist orators.

CYNTHIA Was this in the East End ?

PHIL No, in Glasgow. They lived in the Gorbals! That's where a lot of the Jewish people settled. And it was quite a heavy scene. There were razor gangs and a lot of sectarian violence. There were Jewish gangs and Catholic gangs and Protestant gangs. My dad grew up in this Red Clydeside culture which was quite internationalist in outlook, for instance the local labour movement had links to the Wobblies in the USA.

My dad was the clever one in the family who went to university, trained to be a doctor and then moved down to London. But he retained his radicalism; in fact, he is still pretty Bolshie ! He is a model of somebody who has not mellowed but retained their radicalism into old age.

My mother was radical in a different sense—a totally different sense! She was part of what has been called the shopocracy in South Wales, they were tradespeople—builders, actually. And they looked down on the miners: the miners were people who kept coal in their baths and they went to chapel and my mother's family were C of E. So she grew up very much formed by that sort of lower-middle-class respectability and sense of class distinction.

In a way she became a Thatcherite before Thatcher. At least she was a sort of proto-Thatcherite in terms of her views. And of course, my dad was the opposite. So I grew up in a family where there were these constant—I think 'discussions' would be too polite a word for them. I mean, it obviously got embroiled in a lot of other stuff that was going on between them that I was only partly aware of. So the personal and the political were always enmeshed, but not in a very constructive way...

CYNTHIA Did they stick together ?

PHIL Oh, yes, yes! I mean, they had this override, which was a notion of themselves as an ideal couple. Although they had almost nothing in common culturally, certainly not politically. Well, my mum eventually became a Tory councillor. My dad actually didn't vote. He didn't support the Labour Party. In the 30's he tried to volunteer for International brigade in the Spanish Civil War, but because his father was very ill, he didn't go.

CYNTHIA So anarchism was more his thing really?

PHIL No, he was a member of the ILP, Independent Labour Party. My grandfather was the anarchist I don't think there were many ILP candidates in London.

CYNTHIA It was a very Scottish ...?

PHIL I think it was quite Scottish, yes. John McLean was a leading ILPer. They were the backbone of Red Clydeside. Not that much of this was talked about when I was growing up. I mean, there were these continual political arguments, and of course I sided with my dad, in the sense of ganging up against my mother, which I now feel quite bad about. Because it wasn't just about the politics—you know, it never is!

My mum was very idealistic in her way too. Her heroine was Florence Nightingale. And in a funny kind of way, as well as being proto-Thatcherite she was a proto-feminist. I mean she didn't like housework at all, she didn't like cooking; she probably would have been much happier not having children, staying working in the hospital—because she was very good at it; she was a very good

nurse and then she was a sister at a very early age, she was obviously very hard working... But she had not much formal education, she left school at sixteen. She obviously could have become a matron and had a full life that way. I think in a way she would have been happier. She really wasn't cut out for children and family life. But she took it on board: she gave up her job, that was what you did when you got married - you not only changed your name to the man's, you stayed at home and became a housewife.

CYNTHIA We're talking the Fifties now. This is something I think we need to really take on board in this project of ours. Because I think that—this is just my take on it, my age perhaps- but really the Fifties is where everything started, not the Sixties.

PHIL Yes, that's absolutely right.

CYNTHIA So you were seven at the start of the Fifties... and I was sixteen. The Fifties was my experience of young girls getting married. My perception of family life in the Fifties is very specific. Can you tell me what was going on in your family related to that? That period was the time of the family that Ronnie Laing was criticising, wasn't it - the family he castigated because it inculcated a fear of death.

PHIL Yes. Well, I was a patient of Ronnie Laing's for a time, actually, for about two years, an extremely bad experience, maybe talk about that later. But – well, let me just think about this. ... You see, I think my family was very insulated from what was happening in the world. For example, we did have lots of relatives in Wales and in Scotland but we very rarely saw them. It was a real nuclear family. Apart from these arguments that I became more aware of as I grew older—which would have been about issues of the day, or at least they always started to do with that.

The issues came up in the papers we read. My dad read the News Chronicle which was a rather estimable paper. It was a sort of Left Liberal – they had James Cameron who was their Foreign Correspondent? They covered the Korean War and had pretty much an anti-war stance. They weren't so gung-ho anti communist as some of the other papers - 'this is the Cold War and we've got to win it' kind of view of it. So my dad read the News Chronicle and I read the News Chronicle. My mum read the Daily Mail, which had a very different take on things. So we were a two-paper family, you know, two different views of the world, really. And I suppose that it was through the newspapers that the family culture became politicised.

CYNTHIA Were you the only child?

PHIL Yes, I was, its something I have subsequently regretted, and even at the time, though I enjoyed being the only one, it was also very lonely at times. We'd got a car—that was a big event. I think my parents were fairly status-conscious; they were into the new consumerism that was developing in the late 1950's. We had a TV set -the only thing I remember about that was that my hamster got electrocuted by it, so I {LAUGHS} wasn't that up for it. I still listened to Children's hour with Uncle David and Toytown, but I also grew up with Muffin the Mule ...

CYNTHIA Muffin the Mule! The first time I saw television, that flickering blue-ish light ... 'Wow, it's...Muffin!

PHIL I was just thinking about what you said about the sexual politics of the family and childrearing. I think my mother definitely had this view that her vocation was to stay at home and look after me and do the housework and make a home for myself and my dad. But the only thing was that she didn't enjoy it and she really wasn't very good at it. She would have enjoyed doing other things. She knew it, but she was never able to say it, because she would have regarded that as a betrayal.

My dad was actually much better at housework and cooking. He was a great cook, actually. Still is! He enjoys cooking. He wanted to be a pastry cook not a surgeon. And he used to do a lot of cooking: you know, making toffee and stuff like that. And I'd do that with him.

CYNTHIA Really! ...Yes I remember making toffee, cracking it with a hammer and everything! It's funny, I don't think of that as time-specific. But it probably is, isn't it. We don't make toffee any more.

PHIL I think if you asked most children to say, I suppose sometimes they do bits of cooking at school and things and it's fun. But toffee, no.

CYNTHIA Did you feel any kind of uninhibited love and warmth in this family, or not really?

PHIL Well my dad was what Jules Henry called an 'imp of fun' dad. He wanted a playmate, not a son. He used to often call me 'Gershon', which was the name of his younger brother. And he basically treated me like a younger brother. So we would go out together a lot. He was great fun to be with, in the sense that we'd go out and play football and we had these model planes and a model railway. But I should have really been playing with children of my own age. But there just weren't any in the block of flats. So my dad adopted me as a sort of playfellow, which was in a rather seductive mode of relation. And there's no doubt that this related to his own kind of – well, how can you put it? – his own orientation...his repressed homosexuality- not that he ever did anything actually physical to me.

I discovered many years later that my parents had hardly had sexual relations for most of their married lives. They didn't suit each other in lots of ways. I wasn't really aware of the sexual dimension of it except my mother's frustration. Well, presumably my father's as well. But my mum became ill, you see. She had a bad back, she had sciatica. And for a lot of my childhood she was actually in bed. In those days if you had sciatica they told you to lie in bed—the worst possible thing, but anyway you just lay in bed. And she was in a lot of pain. She used to take these Veganins. Sciatica is a terrible pain to have. And so she was really almost paralysed by a mixture of physical pain and emotional frustration. She also became an extremely difficult person to be around. I wrote a poem about all this recently.....

CYNTHIA She lost a life! That generation made sacrifices.

PHIL Yes, that's right. Absolutely. What I feel bad about now is that I sort of ganged up with my dad against her. And the politics was a sort of rationalisation of that. It could have been the other way round: she could have been the radical and I'd have still ganged with my dad against her. The politics just became a way of getting at her: 'Oh, how silly she is to have these ideas!'

PHIL Can I just ask you about John Osborne's 'Look Back In Anger' and his rage – it was rage at 'the mother', really, and the lifestyle. That was the only form of politics I could see going on in the Fifties

– it was kicking women in the teeth, really. In a sense, were you were ganging up with your father against your mother in that way?

PHIL That's right. It's a thing with the war baby generation. The 'angry young men' all were war babies of one kind or another, whether they were literally in the thick of it or not. They'd often been in families injured by the circumstances of war ... like the Krays. The Krays are an extreme version of angry young men. This wasn't just a male thing. There were quite a lot of angry young women, like Shelagh Delaney, though they didn't get the same amount of publicity, of course. I remember Jo Spence writing in her autobiography that she blamed her mother for the war, only she learnt to forgive her. Growing up in families that are being torn apart certainly disturbed a lot of what people sensed families were there for. And a lot of that informed personal and political stances. But as for *Look Back in Anger*, actually when it came out, in '56, I was only 13!

CYNTHIA I didn't mean the play as such, but the attitude it represented - whether the only way to be radical was to kick the feminine, the domestic, the repressive family and all of that, in the teeth and side with men. Women had no option except to side with men. Men had all the action and women had responsibility for all the repression....

PHIL Yes, yes. Well, I suppose the Laingian version of the family fed into that—the schizophrenogenic mother and all that. It was always the mothers that were the problem ... Well, no, sometimes the fathers, also perhaps.

CYNTHIA Okay. But what about politics proper?

PHIL The first political event that made an impact on me was '56, the Hungarian uprising against Stalinism and Suez as well. It was partly because of the *News Chronicle* and their coverage... It was the first time that I got some glimmer that there was something happening in the world outside my own immediate version of it.

CYNTHIA You were thirteen?

PHIL I was thirteen, yeah. And by that time I'd moved on from this rather snobby prep school to another prep school, which was perhaps not quite so snobby: it was called Colet Court—it was actually the junior school of St. Paul's, which is a public school. And I'd got a scholarship to go there. And Colet Court was in Hammersmith which meant a long journey, which was always a problem. It was a school that specialised in the Classics. So from a quite early age—I think, ten—I learnt Latin and Greek. Latin and Greek were the core curriculum. And games, of course.

I was just on the brink of adolescence ... What sort of stuff was I into? I started to write very bad poetry. I think the main thing was that I was growing up in this rather cocooned sort of world where the school culture was a version of the English public school tradition, and you were being told in lots of different ways that you were the member of a privileged elite and with privileges came responsibilities, and those responsibilities included concern for those who were less privileged, and that at some point one would go out to change the world for the better – you had a civilising mission ...it was a hangover from the sort of education that equipped people to go out and rule the Empire.

The other issue was religion. Because my mother was a Christian—even if non practising. My dad was also a non-practising, but a Jew. When I moved to the senior school, St. Paul's, I'd have been fourteen, they had a big thing of everyone being confirmed. It had been the cathedral school. Until then my religious identity had never been an issue. I was the head boy in my last year at Colet Court because I was clever and good at games. So I was, in that sense identified with the whole public school ethos, although I began to rebel against it.

There was a carol service, and the head boy had to read the lesson. I remember the headmaster saying to me—did I have a problem, as he assumed I was a Jewish boy with a name like Cohen... though I didn't go to Jewish prayers. They had separate Jewish prayers, but I never went to any of those. And I wasn't brought up Jewish, really, at all. But he said, well, would I have a problem in actually reading this lesson about the birth of Christ? I was so keen on the idea of getting up and doing the reading I said, 'Oh no, not at all!' So when I moved to the senior school, it was decided that I should be confirmed. My mother was very keen on this.

The only Jewish thing we did was Passover. We used to do Passover and we had people downstairs who were fully paid-up bona fide Jews who'd actually emigrated from Palestine back here. Mr Rivlin was in business—I think he made contraceptives, though we never talked about it, but it was rubber goods! Anyway, when it came to Passover the Rivlins knew how to do the business. They could speak Hebrew, they were the real thing!

My dad had forgotten all that. He'd gone to Shuul as a kid m been barmitzvehed – I think maybe he had a little bit of Yiddish, but he was not religious. Religion wasn't really talked about. But at school it became an issue. The school chaplain said, 'Okay, well, do you want to be put down on the list of people to be confirmed?' Of course, I hadn't even been baptised. Circumcised, yes; baptised, no! My mother was very keen, so I said, 'Oh, all right, I'll go and be confirmed.' Which meant that at the age of fourteen I had to be baptised, which was kind of ridiculous. And then you had to go to all these bible classes and you do all this praying and stuff.

Before the actual confirmation ceremony in St. Paul's Cathedral, I began to think about it for the first time. I'd gone through a little religious phase, as one does, when I was seven or eight. But it wasn't really much to do with religion! It involved wrapping the bible up in a gorgeous silk cloth, as a holy relic and stroking it, while I played with my willy! Very Freudian! But then as an adolescent I began to think: what was this thing about being Jewish or Christian or whatever –what did it mean? Was I both or neither? I was a mischling, really. Anyway, I went to see the chaplain, and I said 'Look, I don't believe in the divinity of Christ and I don't believe in the miracles' and he said, 'Philip,' 'don't worry, we all have these little doubts from time to time,'. It's like he didn't want to lose anybody from his list! I think it was a bit of a feather in his cap to get a Cohen into the fold!

So I went and did the confirmation ceremony in St Pauls Cathedral. All I remember about it is that I was dying to go to the loo, I was dying for a piss. We had to wait in queues to have the bishop put his hand on you— the laying-on of hands. All I could think of was 'For God's sake get to me and do the business before I piss myself!'. And then afterwards I rushed to the loo, —bliss! So when my mother came up afterwards, all glowing with maternal pride and asked me, 'Do you feel different?' I could honestly say 'yes' though of course not for the reason she thought. That was the first and last time I've ever taken part in a religious service, apart from Carol Singing. What actually got confirmed was my view that organised religion is institutionalised hypocrisy



CYNTHIA Religion was a just a kind of conventional morality framework in those days?

PHIL I think it was. It wasn't politicised in the way it's become. At least not that I directly experienced, anyway. It was an issue in St. Paul's School. They had a quota, they could only take so many Jewish students. And they always had their full quota, because the school was very popular with Jewish parents. Jonathon Miller went there, though he was in the eighth form when I was just a new boy in the Remove.

I suppose the thing that happened at St Paul's that was most significant to my future was that I did Classics. Because if you were clever you did Classics, there was no question. It was one of those schools where you did your O Levels, as they then were, at fourteen. You did your A Levels at sixteen. And you spent the last two years preparing for university, which is why everyone got scholarships to Oxford and Cambridge. I mean, it was the sort of school that if you didn't go to Oxford or Cambridge you were a failure. If you went to LSE or something, it was as if you had let the side down.

I started to do very badly at my school work. Having been the head boy and top of everything, when adolescence and acne hit I went to the bottom of the class. I went from being very good to being quite bad: I mean, bad at academic work. I remember this friend of mine when I was, I suppose, fourteen... I'd got my six O Levels, but they weren't very good grades, you know. I remember this boy saying, 'I thought you were good, Cohen. I didn't know you were bad!' So the equation was: if you were bad at work you were a bad person, and if you were good at work you were a good person. There wasn't any kind of school counterculture in which these values might get challenged.

So I started to do very badly and be very unhappy and I also had this terrible acne, which was a great source of anxiety and despair .... I was quite good at sports, actually. I was quite sporty. But anyway, I changed from doing Classics. It was realised that I wasn't going to make it as a classicist. So I changed to take History. I got two A Levels in Classics and I actually failed Greek, so I just got two. It was clear that I wasn't going to be a classicist. My dad's ambition for me was to be a classicist. He'd wanted to be one. If he hadn't been a surgeon or a pastry-cook, he wanted to be a classical scholar. So in a way I was sabotaging his ambition for me.

So I moved across from Classics to do History. The school had a history teacher called Mr Whitting, who was a bit like the guy in Alan Bennett's play 'The History Boys'. He was a rebel. He was a real character. I think the only reason they tolerated him was that he got very good results for Oxbridge. And basically he gathered around him all these public school rebels—all the people who were growing their hair long, were starting to read poetry. And he said, 'Quick, you want to go and read this Raymond Williams!' He opened a whole new world of ideas...Gareth Steadman-Jones was in my class, he is Professor of History at Cambridge now. He was a real goody-goody, actually, but anyway.. at the age of sixteen we'd be sitting around discussing Marx's Grundrisse for fuck's sake! And we'd be going off to the library and reading William's The Long Revolution. A few of us got into Sartre, we all became existentialists. And we'd sit there and try and work our way through Being and Nothingness. I didn't get half of it, but it was part of the culture. Existentialism was the thing – and the Beats! So I moved away intellectually from the public school ethos. Classics equalled being a regular public school guy, supporting the school teams, rowing, and all that. History was this other way of understanding the world. And actually our Mr. Whitting, he was a Byzantine scholar. He was

quite well known in his specialist field. But he'd got around him a number of other teachers, and they were also pretty interesting people.

There was this one guy—Connie Rainbow, he was called, and basically he was gay. He spent a lot of time trying to seduce boys, mainly by having reading groups where you got to read D.H. Lawrence. It was the time of Lady Chatterley's Lover case, and I remember he would get a coterie of boys that he fancied, of whom I was one, and we'd sit there and read these extremely erotic passages! We'd all get hard-ons! He was obviously trying to get us going. He made one pass at me, which made me rather confused and I burst into tears. Nicholas de Jong, who is now a well known theatre critic and a very out gay rights person, he was one of Connie's protégés. Anyway, Connie Rainbow eventually went—I think he went too far with one boy and, the next thing we knew, that was goodbye to him.

He was actually quite a good medieval historian. But I never really got turned on by that. It meant poring over all these medieval documents and worrying about Thomas à Becket and Henry II and stuff like that, not to mention Magna Carta ! Despite all this, the History Department at St Paul's did have some quite serious historical scholars and people who saw it as their vocation to give young people a wider sense of the world. That's why I eventually went and did History at Cambridge: because I got a scholarship to go there and do it.

The budding historians were a kind of dissident intelligentsia. We were into existentialism, the beats, and CND.

CYNTHIA Yeah. Because you talked about Suez and Hungary. I just wondered whether the Cold War was getting to you, the fear of war?

PHIL I think it was more a cultural thing. It was like you grew your hair long—that was taboo, because you had to have a certain regulation haircut. There were things about flairs—I remember they used to have these inspections where the prefects would get out tape measures and measure the width of your trouser bottoms... And then discovering the Beat poets, Ginsberg, Corso, Ferlinghetti, San Francisco and City Lights Bookshop. And that flowed into the politics. It was mainly the cultural aspect I was interested in, which was the poetry, the jazz, the life style. But of course one was aware that it was linked to a politics, especially to CND.

CYNTHIA So we've gone now into the late Fifties – well, early Sixties. And you were still at school, being influenced by these historians....

PHIL Yes. But also by Sartre and De Beauvoir. Sartre and De Beauvoir were our role models, you see! I mean, this was a peer activity. This was young people talking amongst themselves. We weren't getting any of this from our teacher. Mr Whitting was in that sense very old-fashioned. He just about tolerated Raymond Williams, he had no time for Freud but he had at least read Freud. Part of the excitement of it, was that it was an intellectual subculture or almost counterculture to the Public School ethos... And it was possible because they gave you a lot of time to go to the library and read on your own.

CYNTHIA Do you really mean De Beauvoir? Was it not really Sartre that you were influenced by at the time?

Well, it was mainly Sartre. I tried to read *Being and Nothingness*, which I must say at the age of sixteen or seventeen found quite hard going. Because obviously we had no philosophical training. Then I started reading the novels and I got to Camus and I had a big thing about his novel 'The Outsider'.

CYNTHIA But De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, you wouldn't have read? It was the relationship with Sartre...?

PHIL Yes, it was the relationship. They had this kind of free relationship and it was all part of the thing about Paris and café culture and Edith Piaf. It was wrapped up in a rather romanticised view of what was going on – it was *la vie bohème*. We saw ourselves as bohemians. We were discovering a version of Bohemia. Not that we actually went to Soho much — actually I did go once or twice. At the age of seventeen I went to this 'existentialist' coffee bar in Soho, I was terrified! It was modelled on the beat scene in San Francisco, I think, which was just beginning. But despite having a copy of *Howl* in my pocket, I was just a very straight, screwed-up English public schoolboy with long hair and spots.

I think the politics were a fringe benefit, more of an add on. I remember there were these big sit-down protests against the war. Actually my mum was watching a report about it on TV during one of her regular bouts of sciatica. She used to watch a lot of television. And she saw these marches and sit downs and she said to me, 'You know, Philip, I think you should be taking part' She saw this as something important that as a member of my generation I should be part of. My mother was a very contradictory figure. In contrast my dad was rather dismissive of it all. He didn't think it was real politics.

So, I went on the Committee of 100 demos. I didn't go on the Aldermaston marches as such, I just joined them at the end, I'm afraid. But I also discovered anarchism. I discovered *Freedom Press* — this funny little place in Fulham. In an ordinary road they was this house with all this old stuff. They had the original copies of *Freedom* that Kropotkin and Rudolf Rocker edited. I started to read up all about this, —not really knowing much about my grandfather. Because my dad told me very little about his family, or indeed about the old days. But it's interesting that I rediscovered that political culture. I'd get all these grubby pamphlets about anarchism, Yeah, there they were, all these musty papers ....

I became interested in the Spanish Civil War, it was exciting, and it was also very idealistic. Anarchism for me meant believing that if you left people to their own devices, the best of their humanity would emerge. It was hopelessly naïve, but at that age of seventeen, you know, it was what you wanted to believe. Get the state (and parents and school), off our backs, and we will make the best of all possible worlds.. So I would have described myself as an anarchist. Existentialist too. They sat together. It was a rebel stance, it was individualistic, it was 'in your face'.

CYNTHIA Was you already anti-Marxist in the sense of not believing in the party structures etc...?

PHIL Yes pretty much. There was a brilliant little journal called *Anarchy*— I've still got the copies — which Colin Ward edited; they had these artists, Rufus Seagar and Andrew Moyles, who did these brilliant covers. One of them was a bus driver and the other worked on London Underground. But they were brilliant cartoonists. Each issue was very small but packed with interesting articles. They

had people like Alan Sillitoe writing for it. They had people talking about the adventure playground movement and about ecology, this is early 1960s remember! I just found all that very attractive and much more exciting than joining the Labour Party - that just wasn't even on the horizon.

The anarchists were very community-oriented. Jo Benjamin wrote for them and also they linked back to a pre war tradition of libertarian education. I was rebelling against my own education, so I was always looking for other models of how education might be done. They were very strong on that. They were at the beginning of the radical child centred view of education that emerged with the 60's counter culture

CYNTHIA Free schools. They were a bit later.

PHIL They were later. But a lot of the impetus came out of that... Well, that was one of the currents that went into free schooling and de-schooling and all of that. I didn't have much time for 'Freedom', which I found rather boring, fighting the battles of the past between different anarchist sects. It was full of these interminable family quarrels, mainly about class. I was a cultural anarchist more than anything else.

CYNTHIA It was anti-authoritarian, really.

PHIL Exactly. That's exactly the right word for it. We saw socialism, or at least state socialism, as being as much the enemy as communism. So when I go to Cambridge I was ready to engage with some of that debate.

In many ways Cambridge was a disappointment, because it was so much like a public school writ large at that time. I went to Queen's College. I was an exhibitioner, a scholarship boy. And the history we did was exactly the same history we'd done for the last two years at school. We did the Tudors and Stuarts. You got to be lectured by the people you'd just read, but you'd already done it. And it was just boring...

At Cambridge I met a guy who's become my lifelong friend, Donald Nicolson-Smith, who was also an anarchist. Now he's a very well known translator. I think he is probably still an anarchist. There was an anarchist group there, and the Heretics Society, originally founded by Bertrand Russell. Krishnan Kumar, who is now a Professor of Politics at Kent was a leading light of these societies, both of which I joined. The Heretics was a sort of free thinking debating club and we used to invite people who had heterodox views. We had somebody from the Flat Earth Society to talk to us. We had a linguist who thought he'd invented a language in which people couldn't actually make untrue propositions!

I bathed in this intellectual hothouse atmosphere. That was a good thing about Cambridge, you met people who were passionate about ideas. They were also rather fucked-up, adolescent, middle-class boys who knew next to nothing about life. There were some women on the horizon but it was very much a male scene. You had the hearties, people who were still into rowing, rugby, getting drunk and throwing toilet rolls at each other. And the arties, who wore velvet jackets and corduroy trousers, and grew their hair long.

I got very much into the arts. Not that my family had any interest in that at all, but I got to be absolutely passionate about painting, photography, cinema, about theatre. I couldn't get enough of

it. My big regret is not becoming a film director, but when I was at Cambridge I made some films. I was chair of the film society, and set up a documentary film festival, which is still going today. We invited all these famous directors down, like Joseph Losey. I was into Cahiers du Cinéma, even though my French was not really up to making sense of a lot of it – it was the thing to be seen reading. And I used to write erudite film reviews for Cambridge Review, which was the journal the academics wrote for. And Granta. I used to write appalling stuff about Antonioni and the 'ontology of the mise en scène'. I'd sit in the dark scribbling all this stuff down and people read it. I fancied myself as Cambridge's leading film critic! It was at a time when people were discovering Cahiers du Cinéma and the French New Wave, and this highly intellectualised way of looking at film was very much in vogue, though looking back on it, it was all rather silly and pretentious. Now this approach has been institutionalised as 'media studies'.

CYNTHIA You said Cambridge was a disappointment—it sounds as though it was a riot and you had a great time!

PHIL It was a disaster in terms of thinking I was going to have an academic career. Because I dropped out. For a lot of the time I was extremely lonely, miserable, sexually confused and out of it. And I really didn't do my academic work very much. In fact I did History Part One, which I just scraped through, whereas as a scholar you should be getting a first. So I thought, 'Oh, I've got to stop doing History,' so I went and did Archaeology and Anthropology instead. I really wanted to do sociology because I got interested in it after Michael Young from the Institute of Community Studies came and gave a lecture. But sociology was not offered so 'arch and anth' seemed the next best thing.

The highlight in my intellectual life at that time was a series of lectures given by George Steiner about Marx and Freud. Nobody in Cambridge in 1962 had heard of Marx or Freud. I mean, literally they were not on the curriculum. Steiner was very dramatic in the way he performed his thinking – a real 'mitteleuropa denker', a dialectician with a way with words! He just had us spellbound!

CYNTHIA Were Lévi Strauss and Margaret Mead on the syllabus at this time?

PHIL Well, Levi Strauss was just coming over the horizon, through Edmund Leach, actually who was briefly my tutor. Leach was one of the people that introduced structuralism into British anthropology. But most of what we got was Radcliffe Browne and doing this mapping-out of kinship relations in these very complicated networks - in Africa mainly. Cross-cousin marriage and stuff like that. Between the archaeology, which was just pure science, the physical anthropology, which was all evolutionary theory, and these kinship systems, it was a very meagre intellectual diet. There was none of the cultural anthropology I was interested in. Through Leach I also got to edit Cambridge Opinion, which was quite a status thing to do, to get the editorship of that. I remember I wrote some stuff, and I showed it to him. 'Cohen,' he said, 'this is gobbledy-gook!' And it was, you know.

I think what was important about Cambridge, from its philosophical tradition but spread into the other disciplines, was this commitment to clarity of thought. So of course they hated Continental philosophy, and most of them, still do. Derrida, Sartre and so on—they hated it!

The importance of precision of thought and clarity of language is something which only in the last few years I've begun to fully recognise and appreciate and struggle to attain. I went through this

long detour through structuralism, post-structuralism and all the rest of the isms and accreted this horrendous vocabulary of jargon, which in the last ten years I've tried to slew off. So Leach was an important influence at the level of 'Let's just cut through the crap. If you can't say something clearly, then it's because either there's something you haven't investigated properly or there's some basic confusion in your own way of thinking about it.' I think that's an important lesson. And even though it can go in a rather elitist direction, I still think it's important. So Edmund Leach was an influence. And, yes, George Steiner - Anglo Saxon clarity and middle European dialectics - rather strange bedfellows...

But none of this counteracted the sense I had of being very alienated by a lot of the culture in Cambridge. Because the people there were the sort of people I'd been at school with. The whole ethos of Cambridge at that time was really a very rarefied public school kind of thing ...

CYNTHIA I keep hearing of people in every generation who have that experience of Cambridge, even today ...It's so class-bound! So in a way you did really well to find a counterculture in it, didn't you.

PHIL Well, there were these little niches, little pockets of craziness – and people like my friend Don. He was very involved with the French situationists. That's how I became involved in that. Through Don Paris became much more my cultural and political reference point.

My main problem though was that I was not able to make any headway with my studies. The problem was the Archaeology—I had no science background, you see, and Archaeology is of course science-based, I was completely lost and just couldn't do it. The Anthropology was physical anthropology and the most tiresome part of social anthropology, which is kinship systems. And partly because of my own family and my frame of mind, I was hopeless at it. You know, it was like algebra and I was never good at maths or algebra at school.

The fact that I was pissed off with the cultural scene and was not making any progress with my studies were the two reasons I decided to leave Cambridge at the end of my second year. Quite independently, and for both similar and different reasons Don also decided to leave. And the first thing I did was to go to Paris.

CYNTHIA Soho was never able to offer what Paris did?

PHIL No. Well, there were English beats. When I dropped out I got involved with the beats in a way. They did have people like Mike Horowitz who was a Beat poet and modelled himself on Ginsberg. And there was Jeff Nuttall, who wrote Bomb Culture. I got involved, a bit later on, in the mid-Sixties, in a whole lot of counterculture stuff that was happening in London

CYNTHIA . So you and Don dropped out. You didn't do degrees?

PHIL We dropped out, yes. We didn't do our degrees. We left. I ran away to sea. I'd always had a thing about boats. I went to Grimsby and got a job as a deckie learner, shipping out of Grimsby. I've still got my pension from that, as a Member of the National Union of Fishermen !

CYNTHIA You were actually on fishing trawlers?

PHIL Yes, we went off to Iceland. But it wasn't just about the sea. It was more about discovering my sexuality. At Cambridge, there was, and I'm sure there still is, a kind of gay culture which goes

right back to the thirties. Because I was involved in various kinds of art scenes in Cambridge I met people who were 'out', though it wasn't called that, of course, at the time, but I encountered it. If you were in Cambridge, you actually are in a privileged position and all sorts of people want to come and do stuff for you. I remember I got quite involved with Anthony Balch. Balch was a filmmaker who worked with Burroughs and Alexander Trocchi in the early part of the Sigma project. He came up to talk about Wilhelm Reich at the Heretics Club. He was very friendly, in fact a bit too friendly, he wanted to get me in an Orgone Box! I didn't fancy him at all. There was a gay scene associated with the arts in Cambridge and since I was in the Film Society and was making sub-Antonioni short films I had various quite close emotional relations with guys, but it never lead anywhere.....

Being on a trawler was a different proposition altogether because it is obviously all-male world and it's also a very homo-social world. If you're young – if you are a deckie learner or a galley boy, there was an assumption that you would sexually service the crew. It links to a whole history of apprenticeship, when apprentices were supposed to give their favours in return for perks – well, that's another story, really, about the sexual politics of male apprenticeship.

On my first ship I was under this 'Cook', who I really loathed. Unless you sexually serviced this guy he gave you a really hard time. So you were stuck on this boat with somebody you didn't really want to have anything to do with but, if you didn't, he made your life unbearable.

CYNTHIA These guys, the trawlermen, they would be leading heterosexual lives at home .....?

PHIL Yes, that's right, exactly. But sex with other guys was okay on board ship. But on one trip I did meet a young guy because I was the galley boy and he was the deckie learner. And we rather fell for each other. But again, sadly or strangely, we didn't get it together. Because it was almost like breaking a taboo. It was okay if it was younger/older. This was part of the thing, that the apprentice is put in a quasi-feminine position. He does all the cleaning-up, does all the shit work. Cleans out the cod residues, does the housework around the mess deck, does the cooking. So he's put in this proto-domestic role. And along with that goes a sense that having to serve the men as their wives would in bed. You know, it's a long tradition. But I think it added to my sense of confusion about the whole thing, where my own sexuality was going. But I didn't really connect that up with any sexual politics as such at that time.

CYNTHIA You resented it?

PHIL Yes! I felt I was being trapped into doing what I didn't want to do, at least not with Cook and the person I might have wanted to do it with, it wasn't allowed!

CYNTHIA Because he was your age, that would have been really being gay?

PHIL Yes, that's right, that would have been really being gay, that's it. It was that sort of double standard, a generational thing cutting across it. But I enjoyed going to sea. I still do sail a lot – I have my own sailing boat. And it was a very interesting time to be at sea, because it was the period of the Cod War. So when we got off the coast of Iceland, we'd have to douse the lights— it was very dangerous, especially fishing at night. You didn't want the Icelandic gunboats to come along. because you were fishing inside the waters that Icelanders were claiming as theirs. You had to work in complete darkness. And people suffered terrible injuries as a result of working in the dark,

especially from these enormous doors that hold the net that open, when they swing on board... they weigh half a ton. ... A lot of the guys lost thumbs...

As a result of that experience I lost any residual romanticism I had about working-class jobs. All the guys on the boats didn't want their sons to follow them. They all thought the life was crap. Although there were aspects of it I liked, the sense of camaraderie especially amongst the deckies, apart from the sexual dynamic of it.

CYNTHIA There were a lot of studies of male occupations at that time...There was Rafael Samuel writing all about dockers, wasn't there?

PHIL Well, there was a guy that wrote about the fishing : Trevor Lummas. Now, he had been a trawlerman, he knew what he was writing about. Redmond O'Hanlon wrote a book recently called *Trawler*, he's a travel writer. He told the trawlermen 'I want to go out in a force eight storm'. He wanted to write a storm, basically. But he wrote the book in such a way it just doesn't ring true if you have been working on a trawler ... He made the people sound heroic, like Salgado's manual workers. And although there is a sort of heroic quality about fishermen, it's not a self-consciously heroic quality. I mean, people are not strutting around being embodiments of heroic masculinity ; they're doing their job because it's the only thing they know how to do. And it's hard, and they'd probably rather be somewhere else doing something else. Jean Gaumy's photography book 'Men at Sea' captures the scene much better.

I did have this romanticism which I suppose I got from the Beats – the idea of the road, it was a very American image really, of the migrant worker, linked to the Wobblies and the idea of the worker who was on the margins of society, a bit of an outlaw and did the really hard jobs. And trawlermen were a bit like that.

CYNTHIA When were you on the trawler?

PHIL Well, I dropped out of Cambridge in '65, so that would have been '65, '66. And then I came back to London and got involved in the beginnings of the counterculture movement.

I came to London and I got involved with this artist called John Latham, who was one of the people who'd come up to Cambridge to speak to the Heretics Society. He was a very interesting guy. He's just recently died. He was the same generation as John Berger, but he was a very early performance/installation artist. He made these big canvases out of books. It was an early critique of the logocentrism of Western culture, in a way. But he had never read Derrida! He was more influenced by science, although he wasn't really a scientist.

I went to live in his house as an assistant. And he was involved with Jeff Nuttall—*Bomb Culture* Jeff Nuttall—and Better Books. And there was a whole scene around Better Books, which was really the first coming-together of the people who were to play quite a leading role in what came to be known as the Underground. I suppose it crystallised around the Holy Communion event at the Albert Hall ...

CYNTHIA What was that?

PHIL It was in 1967, when Mike Horowitz invited all these poets from the USA, Russia, Europe – it was a mega poetry event at the Albert Hall. It was a key moment, marking the start of the Counter



Culture. There was convergence between Alex Trocchi and the Sigma group—they were quite linked to the Situationists. And Don had been setting up an English group of ‘sits’ based in Notting Hill. A lot of this was based in Notting Hill, and John Latham also lived in Notting Hill.

So there was that network. And then there was Jeff Nuttall who came out of the arts school scene. The underground moved across from political anarchism to the cultural avant garde and back again. There were a number of hubs of that kind of traffic. The Arts Lab was a key connection point. Better Books was another.

Happenings were what was happening then, in about ‘65/66. You could see how some of the ideas of the situationists had been feeding into that. I was an assistant to John Latham and that’s how I met my first real girlfriend, Elsa, who was about as bisexual as I was. She was much more active in that scene, she was always having scenes with girls! Anyway, we all lived in Old Gloucester Street: just behind the INDICA bookshop in Southampton Row, where IT was produced. That became another sort of hub. We lived in this little house, about five or six of us, we rented rooms from this old lady; it was a beautiful old Georgian house, and she rented it out at almost peppercorn rents to people she regarded as the New Bloomsbury Group. Not that we were. She was just a very nice lady, and she let us stay there in these rooms for almost nothing.

So I became quite active in ‘the scene’, writing for International Times, working for John Latham, helping him set up his events. Scoob Towers: he would build up a column of encyclopaedias and he’d set them on fire. It wasn’t about book-burning, the whole thing was about trying to point out that there was something wrong with a culture totally built around texts which closed down possibilities.

John Latham had this theory he called ‘Event Structure’. I never really understood his ideas. And I have to say when I went to an event celebrating his work after he died, at the Tate, there were all of us there, there was Gustav Metzger, the auto-destructive art guy, and all the other friends of John. Sadly we discovered that none of us really understood his ideas either, but we all loved the guy for his generosity of spirit and the beautiful objects he made. And he’d been treated so badly by the art establishment. He lost his job at St. Martin’s because—again, it’s all very Sixties stuff—he put a copy of Clement Greenberg’s *The Art of The New* in a file of acid and it disintegrated, and he returned it in a canister. The college authorities were not amused and he got fired.

CYNTHIA This is John Latham you’re talking about?

PHIL Yeah, so he couldn’t get a job as a lecturer in any art college in London. Now, of course, he’s been taken up by a new generation and lionised. But at the time he was living in this house with his wife and two kids and finding it really hard to make ends meet.

So there was a milieu where you had these artists and, to a lesser extent, poets who felt they were breaking new ground. They weren’t doing stuff in galleries. Their politics were anarchist. Some of them followed a bohemian lifestyle, drugs and drink were very much part of it. Soho and the French pub was definitely their home from home...

CYNTHIA And the drug of choice then was...?

PHIL I shall have to think about that. It probably wasn’t acid yet. Of course it became acid quite quickly, but it was mainly marijuana. I sort of dabbled in it and a bit with speed, never the really

hard stuff. I realised that cocaine would probably have been my drug but I'd better not do it. And I wasn't very good on marijuana—I got quite paranoid on marijuana, so I never really did IT ... I did a couple of acid trips, actually with Ronnie Laing, which was a disaster!

CYNTHIA Thinking back on it, it was very, very male scene. It was all guys, really. And Elsa? She was in the house?

PHIL Well, she was working with John Latham as well. The two of us were his assistants. And then we got together and moved to this place in Old Gloucester Street. She knew Ronnie Laing, actually, because she was from Glasgow. And that's how I met – I think I met Ronnie Laing through her, or was it through this anthropologist Joan Westcott? Anyway, Laing was on the fringes of the counter culture scene, but he was beginning to become quite famous. David Cooper was also there.

CYNTHIA Everyone was transfixed by Laing. I think he was a weasel and we were rabbits!

PHIL Yeah I started to go to see Laing.

CYNTHIA When? What year?

PHIL Well, that would have been probably '66/67. Something like that.

CYNTHIA So you were aware of being mentally ill...?

PHIL Well, I was aware of not being well, if you know what I mean. I don't know how people would describe my clinical state, but... I was unhappy.

CYNTHIA Not a crisis?

PHIL No, it wasn't a crisis as such; I still had this quite bad acne; I really found it difficult to sustain a relationship, I was very active, if not hyperactive, in all these counter cultural activities. And of course I read Laing. I read 'The Divided Self' and 'The Self And Others', and I felt, like 'Yeah, this is me!' I recognised what he was talking about. So I started to go and see him. And, well, what can I say? It certainly didn't do me any good. I mean, basically Laing decided that I should drop acid ... He was experimenting with this LSD therapy at the time.. so we just dropped this acid and I had two very bad trips, which I think was probably the last thing I should have tried.

CYNTHIA What else what happening around Laing?

PHIL At one stage I lived in this community settlement in East London which I actually put the Philadelphia Association onto. I feel really bad about it now. Gandhi had lived there. It was an old run-down community settlement in Bow called Kingsley Hall. It was being run by this American woman. I lived there for a time... about the time when I started going to see Laing. And I told him about it. His group got interested in it, and eventually through various dubious means they actually got their hands on it.

CYNTHIA The anti-psychiatry people did have some disasters, didn't they?

PHIL People never talk about the people that just didn't come through it. Almost by definition, they're either dead or they're really out of it. The casualty rate was very high! And people like Laing were playing with people's lives in a totally irresponsible way. It was all part of that same counter

culture milieu, whether it was Better Books or International Times or The Arts Lab, or Laing, it was all part of the same thing, it was absolutely taking off. ...

CYNTHIA What about '68 itself? There's the student movement...

PHIL Yeah. Well, actually, what happened was that actually, having been involved in those circles, I was completely outside the university or anything to do with students. I did go back to LSE briefly for a year. I thought I'd have another go at getting a degree. I did Sociology and ended up having to do Statistics, so I dropped out of that as well. That was the time when the LSE sit-ins started. I ended up fairly homeless around Soho, and that's why we started the street communes. We started occupying these big buildings in Central London—about half a dozen of them altogether. From '68 to '69 my bit of the underground was organising around squatting and homelessness...

CYNTHIA So you were no longer doing the arts thing?

PHIL No, well I mean, it was all – how can I say? it was part of the same kind of whirl. I was quite good at organising things, but I wasn't actually writing any poetry or studying. I wasn't actually making movies. I suppose nowadays I was what you'd call them a gofer. I helped out at the Holy Communion event for example and the Dialectics of Liberation Conference.

CYNTHIA I think it was late '65 – shall I tell you why? I'd just had my first baby. I was hanging tight onto my marriage, you know, like young wives did. I took my baby home to Primrose Hill. One evening my husband said, 'Why don't you go out for a walk?' I said, 'What, leave the baby?' you know, like the umbilical cord was still attached. So I did, I went out and walked in the dark. Left the baby behind. Walked in the dark across Primrose Hill and came to Chalk Farm. And there was the Roundhouse, which was all lit up. And out of curiosity I went in—I can see it now—and I stood behind the circle of pillars on the outer edge, and I looked in. And who was there on the stage – it was Stokely Carmichael, Alan Ginsberg, Ronnie Laing—the whole lot of them...it was all going on right in front of me! And then I walked out, and back home. It was only later I realized the significance of that moment. I think that would have been – my baby was two weeks old – it would have been December 1965.

PHIL I got involved because I was a patient of Laing's, During the conference I got chased by Alan Ginsberg. Ginsberg chased anything in trousers under about 22, you know! But nothing happened. I didn't fancy him at all. I did however get to meet Gregory Bateson who was one of my heroes – I just went up to him and said Hello and started asking him a rather confused question about his theory of the double bind and he just smiled and touched me on the arm and said you know you should learn to listen to what your body is telling you...

.... So what I was doing is what nowadays they'd call being an events organiser. I wasn't actually learning how to be a photographer or a filmmaker or a writer or whatever. When it got into the squatting movement and the London Street Commune at that point I moved from being an events organiser to being a sort of political impresario.

CYNTHIA Being homeless and squatting, that must have been using up all your energy...

PHIL We were living in lots of little squats around central London. It was the time of the squatting movement, and there was a lot of it going on. There was a legal loophole which made it possible for

you to do that. But we were always getting raided by the police, and it was a very difficult and demanding – a very difficult way to live.

CYNTHIA Were you seeing what was happening in '68 Paris as significant?

PHIL I think we thought that was just students practising to be lawyers or intellectuals. In so far as I had a political alignment at that time, it was to the situationists, the English situationists. And through living part of the time in Notting Hill Gate I was working with Don Nicholson Smith and Chris Grey and a few others; we put together this magazine called King Mob Echo which was a sort of English version of situationism. And we translated quite a lot of Debord – or rather Don and Chris did.

Situationism never really became embedded in the student movement at the time, though they now all study it and write essays about it. My favourite story about our link with students concerns the Revolutionary Student Socialist Federation, the RSSF. They had a big convention in the Roundhouse and we turned up because we were campaigning against police harassment in the West End. And they wouldn't let us speak! I always remember this guy – I seem to remember it was actually somebody who then became quite high up in the Labour Party, it might have even been Jack Straw, anyway, I remember this guy saying, 'What do you produce—syringes?' It was like they were doing the big student/worker alliance thing and we were lumpen riff-raff. They certainly didn't see any common ground. And I think this confirmed my suspicions about academics, which has stayed with me especially when I became one!

I saw it at the LSE sit in. I mean, it's perfectly fine in a way, the people who were going to become lawyers were practising being lawyers; the people who were going to be doctors were practising being doctors, and the people who were going to be politicians were practising being politicians. The sit ins were a platform on which they could rehearse these professional roles. How could it be otherwise, you might say? Except the rhetoric was otherwise. It was all about proletarian struggle. I remember one occasion when a group of print workers from just down the road in Fleet Street came to the sit in. People got hysterical – it was the worker –student alliance happening before their eyes. Unfortunately the print workers rather spoiled the picture when, instead of saying they were going to join us on the barricades and overthrow capitalism, they said they wanted more of their children to be able to go to the LSE!

My experience of the student movement at this time rather soured my attitude to this kind of left politics. So I suppose that's why I felt rather ambivalent about being involved in your project: because my whole trajectory is quite different from a lot of the people involved who have been radicalised through the student movement.

CYNTHIA Not all of us were at university.....

PHIL No, no. That's right.

CYNTHIA It's not true of Ireni and Diana (members of the group), for example, who were radicalised as students at school ....and were involved in armed struggle... I think some of their politics, antiracism for instance, perhaps date from much later, going to Sweden as émigrés. Anyway let's stop there at the beginning of the Seventies.

PHIL I have to say, probably my life became much less interesting after that.

CYNTHIA Actually, I wonder. Because you've done some fantastic work, so that's come from somewhere, hasn't it.

PHIL I suppose so, yes. But I must say I hadn't really thought much about how one joins up the different parts of one's life before until this conversation.