Uncomfortable times

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These are uncomfortable times. Capitalist forms of society are enjoying an almost unchallenged triumph throughout the world. Global markets in capital, labour and commodities are transforming the economies of virtually all states, even those, like China, which remain under ostensibly Communist government. Socialism, as an alternative economic system based on democratic decision by government, party or working class, seems to have little remaining intellectual or political credibility. We need look no further than the New Labour Party of Tony Blair to see the profound effects on our political culture of this ideological victory of the right.

Yet the shift to the right of the political culture of the West gives rise to deep anxiety and concern. Many of the compromise structures set up in the post-war period to balance the benefits of capital accumulation with security for working and dependent populations have been attacked and dismantled. National governments have generally lost their power to determine levels of taxation, welfare expenditure and employment. 'Flexibility' in forms of production and distribution, and financial assets which can be traded worldwide, have dematerialised formerly solid structures and

exposed individuals and communities to remorselessly competitive pressures.

The Communist economies of the former USSR and Eastern Europe collapsed in part because of the inferiority of their performance to those of the West. At the same time, those social-democratic 'mixed economies' have encountered fiscal crises as they have faced international competition based on lower levels of wages and social benefits; even the former social-democratic strongholds have unravelled in the face of these pressures. But the 'free market' which was propounded in the 1980s as the only alternative to these regulated systems has failed to generate general economic benefit even in its ideological heartlands. The economic insecurity which seems inseparable from global competition has not been confined in its disciplinary effects to unionised workers (as was originally intended), but threatens to engulf the growing middle class too. Substantial levels of unemployment are now taken for granted as an unalterable condition in the advanced economies - this despite the fact that unemployment brings social exclusion, polarisation, and racial stigmatisation, and precludes the development of integrated democratic societies.

One political reaction to this insecurity has been a politics of enragement. Racism, right-wing fundamentalism, punitive treatment of the poor and a generalised resentment against others follow the experiences of downward mobility and loss of hope, among threatened population groups. Isolationism, indifference to injustice and hostility to 'immigrants' are widespread reactions to the insecurities produced by market forces among those who wish to defend their existing advantages. Governments find themselves caught between demands to do something to repair this damage and restore some measure of stability to living standards, and the need to adjust to a competitive environment in order that their economic problems do not grow still worse. No solutions to these dilemmas are presently in sight. J.K. Galbraith, who described an earlier period as one of 'private affluence and public squalor', has characterised the new predicament as a 'culture of contentment', by which he really means the indifference of the 'two-thirds society' to the plight of the marginalised third.

A historical perspective: two cheers for Fordism

The post-war period, across Western Europe and North America, saw an attempt to create a kind of social democracy, following the example of the 1930s New Deal in the United States. The political right had been discredited, in part

because of its compromises with Fascism and Nazism before the war and during the various occupations, and in part because of the catastrophe which befell *laisse-fare* economies in the inter-war period. Working people anticipated *and obtained* some benefit from their role in securing victory for the democracies. Governments expected to take an active part in economic and social reconstruction, and did so according to their various national political traditions. These circumstances led to an unprecedented era of full employment and rapid economic growth, from about 1950 to 1975, in which social expenditure rose to take a much greater share of gross national product.

'Access and adequacy, rather than choice and diversity, were the priorities'

The main engine of growth of this social order was manufacturing industry. Together with mining and transport, manufacturing came to employ a majority of the workforce and to generate a huge range of mass consumer products, creating a moving equilibrium of supply and demand. Corresponding to the mass organisation of production in the factories and the standardised lines of consumer products was a pattern of social welfare provision, in housing, education and health. Organised or supported by government, this welfare provision involved major social investment in housebuilding, school-building and in the development of universal access to benefits such as pensions. Except for the upper segments of the population able to make their own private provision, access and adequacy, rather than choice and diversity, were the priorities. This compromise struck between market and state led to extended rights and powers for trade unions, whose members also enjoyed greater bargaining power thanks to the conditions of full employment.

This 'Fordist' system eventually came to generate its own tensions, expressed in rising inflation, growing trade union militancy and falling profit levels. The long post-war boom created heightened levels of aspiration which it could not ultimately satisfy. So long as citizens looked backwards to the pre-war and war-time periods, there was a sense of relative satisfaction. ('You've never had it so good,' as Harold Macmillan put it.) But once they began to examine their present situation and the differences in opportunities between themselves and fellow-citizens, the limitations of the system were more apparent. At the same time, the structures of familial, class and bureaucratic authority which had remained intact for the older generation became matters of contention for the

young. The relative affluence of the 1960s was greeted with a widening of politics beyond its previous bounds. Many new voices - speaking for class, gender, race, nation and region, and alternative life-styles - insisted on being heard. New arenas of cultural and social contestation opened up.

These tensions might have been accommodated, both in Europe and the United States, but for the Vietnam War, which destroyed the Democrats as a ruling party and the optimism of Lyndon Johnson's 'Great Society' programme of social and racial inclusion. It also provoked world-wide inflation and set the stage for the huge rise in oil prices of the 1970s. The great inflation which followed brought the Fordist era to its time of crisis.

The left lost the battle to resolve this crisis, with the consequences of the defeat felt most severely in the United States and Britain. In other parts of Western Europe, though, much of the former social compromise remained intact.

'The left lost the battle to resolve the crisis of Fordism'

Right-wing governments, allied with the financial and corporate sectors, initiated programmes whose object was to discipline the labour force by raising unemployment, to expose national economies to greater competition, to reduce the 'safety net' of welfare programmes, and to attack the legal rights and powers of trade unions. Changes in the dominant forms of economic activity, from large-scale mining and manufacturing, to tertiary sector activities (such as finance, tourism, distribution and producer services) which were much less favourable to established forms of collective organisation, altered *the* balance of industrial power. For many working people, the economic situation grew sharply worse.

The economic restructuring also meant that a greater diversity of consumer products, and the diffusion of rapidly evolving kinds of communications technology, brought a change in patterns of consumption; the new middle class became the style-leaders. Citizens accustomed to a greater degree of choice in the consumer marketplace came to value this freedom in other spheres of life. Just as Fordist production and consumption provided the dominant model for the boom were extended from car models to portable pensions, to right-to-buy council houses and modular degree courses. The fact that opt-out pension schemes were sometimes a fraud, that house purchases may have left their owners with negative equity, and that class sizes in universities may have doubled, has not altogether

discredited this vision of enhanced freedom.

Beyond the frame of the merely economic, both right-wing and social-democratic governments found themselves virtually mute in the face of a whole range of new social movements organised around gender and sexuality, ethnicity, and the environment. The old political establishments attempted to cast these as 'local', special issue causes, not to be integrated into, and certainly not to affect, the 'real business of politics', but they have proved far more durable and universal concerns since.

This cumulative destruction of the post-war settlement has created acute problems for the established political left in Britain. Local authorities, although almost entirely in Labour and Liberal Democratic hands, now have only shadows of their former powers. Trade union membership has declined significantly as a proportion of the workforce. The public sector of industry, which had provided significant guarantees of job security and trade union recognition to its workforce, has been decimated. The directors of the former public utilities are becoming millionaires on the strength of the profits, which in part they make by dismissing 'surplus' workers. The building societies, formerly co-operative institutions designed to extend house-ownership and to provide secure forms of savings, are becoming just another arm of the financial sector; a potential resource for social responsibility in the housing sector is thus disappearing. The public on whose loyalty Labour had primarily relied and whose lives had been shaped by relative job security and by the welfare state, was being rapidly fragmented and transformed. While Labour was still preaching collectivism, they began to sing to the tunes of enhanced choice, freedom and material gain played so confidently, if deceitfully, by the Thatcherites. While some guilty concern for the worst-off and an apparent regard for public services remained evident in attitude surveys, these residues of egalitarianism did not carry much political weight. To take one glaring example, the very modestly redistributive tax increases announced by John Smith seem to have scared away a decisive tranche of voters at the 1992 general election.

'Governments found themselves mute in the face of new social movements'

There is, nevertheless, a bright side to these transformations. New voices, new diversity and greater choice have broadened the spectrum of politics in these 'New Times', as they have been called. Assumptions which before had been

barely noticed, conventions and forms of authority which previously had not been exposed to view, were now refreshingly challenged. Some radicals have sought to ride the waves of anti-statism and anti-corporatism, saying that the institutions of the old left have deserved their fate, and that it is time to make a completely fresh start. Some of these activists *have* identified real needs and opportunities in the more individualised and differentiated world of post-Fordism, and these have to be taken seriously.

Yet perhaps the old values, institutions and beliefs have been given up a little too easily - certainly by those in party politics. The Mephistopheles of market economics has said to the new radicals, 'if you follow me, and denounce these relics of the past as loudly as I do, you can have electoral success too and escape from perpetual defeat.' But every repudiation seems to call forth the need for a fresh one, every position abandoned seems to expose another principle which was not even thought suspect before. Worse, in most cases, this denunciation of 'the old' has not in fact been accompanied by any acknowledgement of the potential new agendas.

Tony Blair's New Labour is in the middle of this journey, in which old political garments are being removed in a succession of encounters with different power brokers - the latest at the time of writing being the Media Mephistopheles himself, Rupert Murdoch. Abolishing Clause IV, as the totem of Old Labourism, placing an emphatic distance between Labour and the trade union movement, declining to make any commitments whatsoever to restore any industry to public control, refusing to grant local authorities their former powers to manage education, and looking to a new electoral base in 'Middle England' - all these strategies separate New Labour from the collective institutions and loyalties which sustained it in the past. The apparently imminent self-destruction of the Conservative Party, now hijacked by its own sectarians and ideologues, has left a gaping electoral space which New Labour now looks likely to seize. But whether this amounts to anything more than a promise to provide a new political management for a now fully-marketised system remains to be seen. Of course, this new management will be more sensitive to social needs than its predecessor, more committed to social compromise, and more far-sighted about the needs of economic development where this requires an active role for government. We

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hardly need reminding how desperately such a political spring-cleaning is required.

But for this new start to mean more than a fully-marketised society 'under new management', a different vision of social progress is needed. Part of *Soundings'* aim is to help develop this, from a position of critical independence from New Labour - welcome though its advent to power would certainly be.

The democratic state, for a start

Much was wrong with the governmental forms through which earlier collectivist liberals and democratic socialists sought to redress the harm done by private property and the market. The agencies of mass democracy, new to the world in this century, were only to a limited degree properly democratic. The emerging leaderships of working-class movements and their middle-class allies had to make use of the political machinery to hand to redress inequality, impose some measure of planning and defend living standards. These systems were often bureaucratic or authoritarian, and they remained in the hands of too narrow a spectrum (male and white, typically) of the population.

'The democratic state has been, in broad terms, an effective vehicle for the empowerment of citizens'

It is these contradictions in the forms and uses of power by social democrats which have been exploited so effectively to attack the achievements of full employment and welfare states in the past twenty years. In a more extreme form, the monopolisation of power by political parties and central government has also been the downfall of the state socialist regimes of *the* East.

We shall have plenty to say about the limitations of statist politics, and even of formal politics, as means of social improvement and transformation. But here at the outset of *Soundings* something different needs to be asserted, against the grain of the market and the compromises with its ideology which are now to be found virtually everywhere. This is that the democratic state has been, in broad terms, an effective vehicle for the economic and social empowerment of citizens, and not an incubus laid upon them. Democratic governments have brought guarantees of living standards, health and education, where none previously existed. They have acted to limit the powers of monopolistic property owners to extort profits from both producers and consumers, especially in the field of basic

goods and services (such as energy, water and communications). They have ensured that social goods, and long-term interests are taken into account, for example in the provision of transport networks and social services. They have acted to establish public spaces, for recreation and assembly, and, equally, they have provided the infrastructure necessary for a public culture, in broadcasting, education, and the arts. (It is important to recognise this, even though we might now question that received definition of 'the public'.) And democratic governments have acted to ensure that all citizens gained some sense of economic, social and legal membership in society, something that does not happen once disparities of circumstances become too gross and too general.

Social democracy, in its various secular and religious traditions, has to this degree been a signal success in this century; and local, regional and national levels of government have been its principal instrument of betterment and emancipation. Why then are New Labour, the Democratic Party in the United States and social democrats more generally now so reluctant to defend these achievements or to promise to advance them further? Why is a market of some kind now deemed to be the best means of allocating every good and service, when it is clear that markets generate inequalities as their intrinsic driving force? And why is the role of the democratic state, with its formal promise of political equality among citizens, no longer proclaimed as a basic good of a civilised society, when - without its strong agency - inequality and injustice will undoubtedly grow?

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Internationally, too, the role of states and associations of states should be to redress inequality and protect the public good. The European Union now has a limited social agenda of this kind, which *Soundings* will strongly support. This commitment to a measure of international social justice should be, but is not, the function of agencies such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the United Nations.

Those who support democracy should also support democratic states acting to defend the well-being of majorities against powerful and propertied minorities. Instead, formerly socialist parties rush to deny that they have any special intimacy with active government, and prefer to protest that no-one is now closer to the market or the sacredness of private property than they. This is the way of

political disaster. Socialists must defend the role and value of the democratic state, or they become nothing.

Beyond the (conventionally) political

If our first argument is that the achievements of the democratic state deserve defending, and where necessary restoration, our second is that there must be more to radical politics than what is accomplished by governments, or even by politics as it is conventionally understood. Indeed over-estimation of what can be achieved by 'political' means has been a major source of failure in the socialist project, just as excessive belief in what can be achieved by economic agency has been the principal cause of disaster in market-driven societies. The gains in social citizenship which were achieved through government are not in doubt, but they also contained their own contradictions and limitations. Some of the institutions of actual existing social democracy were in part an alienation of democracy, or its sequestration in limited and self-interested hands. It is these inherent contradictions and limitations which the right has been able to exploit in its attacks on the state, and on the kinds of tacit elitism, paternalism and vanguardism with which these agencies have colluded.

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What, then, could be the shape of such a 'politics-beyond-politics'? What spheres of action and agencies of change lie beyond the antagonistic categories of market and state? Even though we would most often side, within democratic capitalist societies, with the latter in its struggles against *the* former, we have no illusions that such a choice is any longer a sufficient basis for a left politics. It is the identification of this third sphere which is essential both to the project of *Soundings* and to the revival of a new left. This sphere is often described as 'civil society', although unlike some we wish to distinguish it from the market as well as from the state.

The distinctive analytic strength of the 'regulation school' (and other theories of Fordism and post-Fordism) was that it sought to *relate* technological, economic, social and political changes as elements of a whole system. 'Fordism' was an equilibrium, a point of balance between contending social forces operating in a particular context of technological development and social

aspirations. The transformation of this Fordist compromise has involved several linked changes, although these are not equivalent in their power: we would hold, for example, that the driving force of capital accumulation has counted for more in these changes than the resistance of particular local communities or social classes, where in earlier phases the balance of power was sometimes different. But there are, nevertheless, many different spheres within which these changes have been effective; these include new aspirations for greater choice in goods and public services; emergent public voices of women and ethnically more diverse communities; technologies of communication which may enable the circulation of new ideas and images of the world as well as of commodity prices and mass-produced information; and scientific discoveries and technologies - socially contested and debated as never before because of their environmental and social consequences.

'Mass populations are being awakened and enfranchised worldwide'

Capitalism may now dominate this post-Fordist social order, having resolved largely in its favour the moment of crisis of the previous regime. But it does not exhaust the possibilities of this social order. Besides powerful agencies of capital, embodied in huge flows of mobile assets as well as in corporations, mass populations are being awakened and enfranchised worldwide. Claims to fundamental rights continue to be made. The great moment of democratisation in South Africa and the overthrow of the tyrannies of Eastern Europe mark not an end of politics, but its revival and renewal.

While consumption grows, so do demands to regulate it in relation to ecological and aesthetic concerns, such as the preservation of landscapes or town centres. Mass communications seek to standardise and homogenise outputs of information, to realise economies of scale and consequent profits, as much as to influence beliefs. But mass communications also mean *more* information and greater access to it for more people. Who can now say whether the net effect of these changes will be to concentrate or to diffuse power and opportunity? Our contention is that this remains to be determined in many spheres of public debate and action. Some of this engagement will be of a conventionally political kind, some will not. For example, the greater independence and equality of women, the decline of marriage, and the emergence of vigorous gay and lesbian cultures in the large

cities of the West, are examples of major changes in society which are more the causes of legislation than its consequences.

Our object in Soundings will be to register changes taking place in many domains of life, both in the major thematic section we will carry in all subsequent issues and in our editorial. We see the narrow definition of politics as a mis-appropriation of the democratic process by both left and right. We shall argue that change can be achieved in many social spaces besides that which is normally designated as political. We will report specific interventions in what is often described as 'civil society', and support them in the cause of a fuller process of cultural and social democratisation. There is a need to interpret these changes - for example, in the changing patterns of family life, in scientific understanding, or in the uses of space or buildings - and to link them where appropriate to more conventional political practice.

The fact that we think that society is much broader than formal politics implies does not mean than we are indifferent to what happens in the narrower political sphere. We believe, though, that political actors, narrowly defined, are normally carried along by these larger currents. Our primary interest is to try to understand these shaping events, trends and spheres of social action, and by interpreting them to inflect them in more democratic and egalitarian directions.

We do not agree that the ideals of democracy and equality have been permanently defeated by the success of the right, and by the pressure to reach an accommodation with the claims of the market as the price of political survival, either in Britain or elsewhere. The defining political achievement of Thatcherism was to represent its real project of re-empowering the propertied and of reimposing a coercive social hierarchy in a language of popular rights, social citizenship and enhanced choice and freedom. The new right has paid unconscious tribute to its actual democratic enemy in its adoption of a radical populist rhetoric. But now that this politics has been largely discredited, and market ideology can again be seen as one-dimensional and partial, it becomes possible to return to a larger agenda of democratisation, with the aim of distributing power and opportunity among all citizens.

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Soundings

Soundings will be a political journal, but its overriding interest will be in the relation between political thought and action, conventionally conceived, and the larger social processes which shape and limit their possibilities. The narrow conception of politics is itself a legacy of pre-democratic times, a hangover from a monopolisation and centralisation of power in society. The institutions of modern democracies - mass parties, universal franchise and general elections - were devised as means of extending and legitimising powers whose origin lay in monarchies and aristocracies. The assumption that power is exercised inevitably by minorities, usually seeing themselves as a ruling class or coalition of ruling classes, deeply shapes modern political processes. Even radicals who are educated in elite institutions - the Grandes Ecoles, Ivy League Colleges or Oxbridge - to share habits of natural authority with those whose substantive politics they oppose may tacitly accept this minoritarian conception of who, in reality, should rule. Parties, whether in government or opposition, usually seek to concentrate, not distribute power. New Labour's backtracking on constitutional and electoral reform is a worrying sign. A new agenda of pluralism requires a more open political process, not a reversion to the hegemonic ambitions of the Labour Party of old.

'The assumption that power is exercised inevitably by minorities deeply shapes modern political processes'

We are not, however, Utopians who imagine that governments are dispensable or redundant, and that all power can be dispersed in some magical way 'to the people'. But we do hold that governments, even progressive governments, are and should be only one locus of power among many. It is the construction of these alternative locations of power that most interests us, and which we intend to map in this magazine. We do not believe that a progressive political project can any longer be formulated in the narrow terms of politics alone - to adapt C.L.R. James's memorable remark about cricket, 'who knows politics who only politics knows?' The real problem now is to reformulate the radical democratic project in its full cultural and social scope.

There are continuities between *Soundings* and the earliest projects of the New Left, which from its beginnings in the 1950s insisted on a redefinition of politics to include much that the mainstream political system left out. In seeking to create a space outside social-democratic or communist parties, the New Left

argued that the reduction of politics to the 'line' of the vanguard party, or even to the programme of the parliamentary socialist party, was never going to be enough. The democratic revolution is a broad river, never containable within the confining channels constructed by politicians and their specific operations. What the New Left has recognised in its various populist, euro-communist, feminist, and now green versions is that formal political action is merely one expression of this transformative process, often as much its enemy as its agent or interpreter. It is vital not to equate the definitions laid down and enforced by political parties with the democratic revolution itself.

This was why the New Left found itself everywhere a critical presence - an opposition or revisionist voice within communist parties, part of extra-parliamentary movements in Western democracies protesting in the streets against colonial wars, the arms race or racism. The New Left defined its function as above all one of critique. This position could at times risk a 'false innocence', where the compromises unavoidable in all political practice were defined as betrayal, or where marxism as a programme was too easily exempted from the failures of 'actually existing socialism'. But, generally, the role of this New Left - more outside the formal political system than within it - has been a principled and productive one. It has contributed much to the widening of the democratic agenda, and we will try to sustain this tradition.

These assumptions explain the format and the name of *Soundings.* The coherence of the worldview of political journals and magazines has often functioned as a generative structure, which at worst allows every happening to be encoded, as by some ideological translating machine, into a predictable 'position' or 'line'. Usually such coherence derives from the primacy of a particular agency (that of class or party, for example, or in the case of some right-wing organs, the all-pervasive and absolute sovereignty of markets over everything). Our own generative structure is more minimal than this and amounts to a commitment to a continuing democratic revolution in a multitude of forms. *Soundings* will carry in each issue a wide range of articles whose purpose will be to keep open debates that others (including the New Labour Party) might now prefer to see closed, as well as to focus attention on new points of growth and

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conflict in our society and culture. To say that politics now has to be seen as a space of interaction between competing voices is not to say that it naturally presents itself in that way: we will defend a conception *of* radical political pluralism and publish voices from its different locations with the aim of sustaining the most open democratic discussion possible. We aim, too, to keep the field wide in terms both of topics and of modes of expression. We would, for instance, like to broaden the usual social science view of politics and to link up actively with cultural concerns and especially with developments and debates in the natural sciences.

Our 'minimalist generative structure' will not produce a position for this journal on every topic that might occur to us: there needs to be a more exploratory debate. A continuing radical programme today needs to be built on a 'decentred' basis, sphere by sphere. Relations to systematic, unifying ideas (for example, to the force of capital accumulation and to the countervailing principles of popular democracy and individual freedom) need to be worked out for each sphere as a new agenda evolves.

For this reason, Soundings will offer in each issue an exploration in depth of a particular theme relevant to the radical agenda in this broad sense. Our overall programme can only be constructed through these explorations, drawing on the capabilities and experiences of contributors who write from their understanding and knowledge of a specific field. Early issues will explore the themes of 'Law and Justice' and 'the Public Good'. 'Law and Justice' will be concerned with tine rights of citizens, both as individuals and as participating members of a political community, and it will be written for the most part by radical lawyers and others at the sharp end of legal practices. 'The Public Good' will explore the interaction between public and private spheres, questioning the relations between state and market, and the meaning of markets for all of us. We are also planning issues on 'Heroes and Heroines', on 'Living in a Global Economy', on 'Risk, Science and the Environment', and on 'African Political Writing'. These 'theme' features will usually take up about half of each issue.

We should like *Soundings* to be able to relate to the world, not only through contributions by individual authors, but also through the varied but interconnected voices of people active in specific communities and spheres of society. We hope to make *Soundings,* if only in a small way, a participatory project which over the years will involve a wide network of people. Welcome