

Space for co-existence?

We have put together this issue of *Soundings* at a time when ethnic hatred is again devastating regions and blighting lives in what was once, with care and difficulty, held together as Yugoslavia. And at a time, too, when NATO, on a mission of bringing to an end such violence across lines of difference, is pursuing its aims by bombing. The contrast between what we are trying to say here in this issue of *Soundings* and what is being done today in Europe - and in part in our name - is shocking.

The second half of this issue is devoted to the exploration of 'transversal polities', defined by Cynthia Cockburn and Lynette Hunter in their introduction as 'the practice of creatively crossing (and re-drawing) the borders that mark significant politicised differences'. How different from the ethnic cleansings of Milosevic, from the failure of 'the West' to see beyond the politics of partition, and from the violence which is asserted by both to be the only road to a solution. As Nira Yuval-Davis explains, transversal politics is an attempt to find a way of doing things which is neither the imposition of a single universal which refuses to recognise that there really are 'differences', nor the retreat into those differences as tightly-bound, exclusivist and essentialist identities. Neither Milosevic nor 'the Allies' in their various guises - which seem always to imagine the world in terms of drawing lines, dividing, allocating - remotely begin to recognise either these complexities or the political possibilities to which they might, just, give rise. And while in ex-Yugoslavia all sides pursue their aims by physical violence of various kinds, transversal politics experiments with talking, creative writing, theatre, joint projects. It would be naive to argue, even to imagine, that the latter kind of politics could be simply transferred to the situation in the Balkans today. (Although it might be noted that one of the groups which contributes to the project of transversal politics is based in Bosnia, and brings together women of Bosnian Muslim, Bosnian Serb, Bosnian Croat and mixed backgrounds -

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see also Cynthia Cockburn's photo-essay in *Soundings* 3.) But juxtaposing the two approaches throws into stark clarity the restricted terms in which 'our leaders' imagine the possibilities of international politics. And how can Blair condemn bombings in Brixton, Brick Lane and Soho, and Clinton the shootings in the Columbine school, when they themselves are 'solving' things through violence?

The contributors to the transversal politics discussion would themselves not argue that they have a 'solution to the difficulties of doing politics, of talking across differences. They recognise quite explicitly that this is tentative, experimental (although it is also suggested that some aspects of recent years' political dialogue in Northern Ireland - and granted the difficulties in which it is presently mired - 'have reflected the beginning of a shift in 'establishment politics' too towards transversal polities'). And this tone of exploration, of the recognition of difficulties, *of* the recognition and examination of failures, is again in shocking contrast to the performances we are forced to witness on what is called the world stage. Pragna Patel presents an account of her involvement in Southall Black Sisters which faces up to the difficulties which have been encountered, which tries to learn from failures, and which sees self-reflexivity as part of the very process of politics. Compare that with the assertive strutting *of* Robin Cook; the macho posturing, the refusal to admit the slightest doubt.

The danger of writing like this about experiments such as transversal politics is that they can come to seem almost bland or idealistic - that they may be arguing that if only we were nice to each other, and kept on talking, then all would be well. This is not how it is. As Nira Yuval-Davis argues, transversal politics does *not* assume that each and every conflict of interest is reconcilable. And here again the contrast with 'formal politics' is revealing. For while in Kosovo the Blair government interprets antagonisms as running so deep that they can only be solved by military intervention, back home here in Blighty his vision is of a politics which refuses to recognise real conflicts of interest at all - 'a politics without adversaries' as Chantal Mouffe put it in an earlier issue of this journal.¹ If anything is bland and idealistic, it is this. And while New Labour scatters the word 'community' through its documents and its pronouncements

1. Chantal Mouffe, 'The radical centre: a politics without adversary', *Soundings* 9, 1998.

without a thought for the complexities and conflicts which it is thereby covering up, transversal politics declares itself perennially sceptical about the term. It is precisely New Labour's bland official use of 'community' and 'multiculturalism' which can refuse to recognise, and in that lack of recognition thereby reinforce, the processes of marginalisation and oppression which cross-cut such unproblematised 'identities'.

These issues of the complexities of identities and differences are ones which have formed a continuing strand of reflection and debate within the pages of *Soundings*. Andreas Hess presented a position statement in issue 11; the theme of *Windrush Echoes* (issue 10) explored the negotiation of certain black and white identities in post-war Britain; the proposals for new forms of social settlement and public sector provision (The *Public Good*, issue 4) confronted issues of difference in the context of demands for 'universal' provision. The dismal horrors of the daily living-out of antagonisms are brought home in this current issue by Nick Jeffrey's detailed and thoughtful account of Stephen Lawrence's London.

It may indeed be that this question of what Bruno Latour calls 'coexistence' is now more centrally on the agenda (or should be) than it has been heretofore. In his opening article for this issue, Latour argues that a key problem for any serious left party must be 'to explore coexistence between totally heterogeneous forms of people, times, cultures, epochs and entities'; that we must remodel the project of modernity away from the old universalisms and towards 'the new obligations of coexistence'. Once again, and as with the project of transversal politics, the aim must be - he argues - to reject both the more obvious, and opposed, alternatives on offer and strike out for something different. In this case the formulation is that we must reject both the current form of globalisation ('that is, in effect, Americanisation') and the reactive retreat into new localisms. Throughout his article, Latour is arguing for a reestablishment, and redefinition, of the differentiation between Left and Right (again, a proposition which clearly distinguishes this issue of *Soundings* from any form of Third Way politics); and key to this redifferentiation, he proposes, must be an exploration by the Left of the connections, rather than the oppositions, between locality and globality.

In this refusal to take as given currently dominant forms of economic globalisation Latour is also reflecting another of the continuing themes of this journal. And he is doing so too when he explores the basis on which such

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globalisation is justified. His fierce arguments against the division between a realm of (incontravertible, uncontestable) Science and a realm of Politics, and the imagination of economics as a Science, lying within the former realm (and being thus incontravertible too), precisely agrees with and develops the arguments we made in the Editorial to *Soundings* ICV It is this removal of the economic from the realm of the political which enables the current form of globalisation to be presented to us as an inevitability. Economics must be brought back into the realm of the political; we must, in Latour's words, collectively appropriate the means of calculation.

One element which Latour brings to all these proposals which is rather newer to the pages of *Soundings* is that this task of reinventing modernity (which would be quite different from the 'modernising' proposed by Blair - the very difference itself undermining Blair's project by demonstrating that there is more than one way to 'modernise') is a task particularly appropriate to the Left in Europe. It is a proposal for a European Left, to set against a future of a world of untrammelled Americanisation (presumably aided by Blair), which is both extraordinarily attractive and, given what is happening in the south-eastern part of this continent, extraordinarily brave.

And not just 'far away' in 'the Balkans'. The crime against Stephen Lawrence was one among many; the London bombings shattered streets which in one way or another stood for some kind of coexistence. Latour argues that we are moving from an era when 'succession' most marked our political imaginations to one in which issues of simultaneous coexistence are more prominent. A move, he says, from time to space. Perhaps another way of putting that is to say that we have moved from an assumption that there was one grand History going on, to a recognition that there are in fact many. It could be argued that a real recognition of space throws into relief the existence of those multiplicities. Space in that sense is about simultaneity: co-existence.

It is also, of course, in part, the changing spatialities of our times which have made the potentialities and the problems of such coexisting multiplicities acute political issues in today's Europe. The combination of ethnic diversity and economic dereliction (two different aspects of two rather different periods of 'globalisation') in certain boroughs of south London is what Nick Jeffrey

Doreen Massey, 'I'm not an economist but ...', editorial, *Soundings* 10, 1998.

documents in his article. In contrast it has been pointed out by many a commentator that the bombs in Brixton, Brick Lane and Old Compton Street picked out with unnerving geographical precision locations which could each be seen, in different ways, as having a confidence in asserting a non-exclusive difference.

The women's projects in Bosnia, Israel, and Northern Ireland, in Southall, in Eritrea, and in all the other initiatives documented with such life under the theme of 'transversal politics' demonstrate, if cautiously, the necessity and possibility of continuing to assert such confidence. They also demonstrate that for new ways of 'doing politics' we must look somewhere else than Millbank and other such places; somewhere else than the excited small circles of advisors and journalists who - creating that self-referential circuit of debate, which so rarely questions its own terms or recognises just how tame and conservative it really is - occupy so much of our broadsheets, airwaves and television screens. In *Soundings* we have always recognised that 'the political' is far more than this.

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