EDITORIAL

Focusing the critique

In the next issue of *Soundings*, we will be initiating as a principal project for the journal a connected and focused critique of 'Blairism', whose underlying orientations and commitments become ever clearer as public sector 'reform' and 'modernisation' continues, and as the New Labour government aligns itself so completely in the current international crisis with the ultra-conservative Bush administration in the United States.

Hitherto, *Soundings* has taken a long-term and exploratory view of its role, seeking to build new foundations for a radical politics by debates in a diversity of areas, represented in the themed sections which have nearly always taken up the second half of the journal. But we now believe it is time to bring the range of arguments we have been developing over the past five years together, and to begin to construct a unified critique and, if possible, alternative programme, in opposition to the New Labour, neoliberal mainstream.

The question of war in Iraq must dominate current criticism of New Labour. But we also need to keep an eye on what is happening in other areas. As several contributors to this issue make clear, the project of neoliberal globalisation and support for the role of the US as the enforcement officer of international politics are intimately connected. Hence there is criticism in this issue of Labour's policies on the public sector, and the negative impact of its particular view of 'modernisation'. Christian Wolmar writes on the wreckage caused by the Government's transport policies; Alan Finlayson writes on New Labour's excessive use of the term modernisation; and G.C. Harcourt argues for a more co-operative approach to wages and management.

We begin though with articles on the international crisis and what it signifies in terms of broader issues of global democracy. Michael Rustin argues that the work of Philip Bobbitt repays study since it is a clear statement of the current US world view: that we are now in the era of the market state, which has very little capacity for defending its citizens, and must rely for its defence on the global power of the United States. For Bobbitt the era of the nation state is over. Neoliberalism and the power of the United States are his prescription for

a new world order. Rustin discusses an alternative view of the nation state. He argues that, however imperfect it may be, the nation state remains the best vehicle currently available for democracy and the sustenance of collective well-being, and that, with a strengthening of the United Nations and comparable systems of international co-operation, it provides the only available basis for a more democratically based world order. It is important to recognise, however, that the limited room for manoeuvre left to the weakened nation states means that they need to join forces with a global movement against neoliberal globalisation - as is revealed, for example, in the way the market state has put the squeeze on options in the UK.

The war in Iraq is part of what can now be a seen as a series of wars ostensibly fought in defence of 'human rights'. But who defines these universals, and who decides whose territory can be invaded in their name? The justification of a defence of human rights is now a common means of presenting US interests as those of the world. And it has been very effective as a means of silencing critics of its global dominance - we become confused when we are accused of supporting indefensible regimes. But of course there are many ways of supporting democracy and human rights in the world which do not involve war - and there are alternative ways of ordering structures of world governance. Current supporters of war in Iraq routinely assume that everyone now agrees that the intervention in Kosovo was indeed justified. Costis Hadjimichalis and Ray Hudson take issue with this view, showing that the human rights justification for the war in Kosovo was also spurious; and they show how complicity with the assumption that the world's most powerful countries have the right to invade selected countries on the basis of defence of human rights serves neoliberalism and undermines social democracy.

Ali Ansari analyses the situation in Iran, another of Bush's 'rogue states'. His work is likely to become of increasing significance if, as seems likely, Bush is at the beginning of a long campaign to assert US dominance through a series of attacks on states he defines as enemies of democracy. Ansari shows how western understanding of Iran has been hindered by its inability to accept models of modernity which are not identical to its own. He argues that in Iran there have been crucial debates about the relationship between Islam and secular society, in which ideas have been developed about the co-existence of a pluralist state and a religious society. Such ideas, indeed, have often drawn sustenance from

the American republican tradition. As Ansari indicates, it is ironic that the religious fundamentalism implicit in Bush's division of the world into good and evil axes should mirror so closely the depiction by Iranian fundamentalists of the USA as Satan. Ansari's intervention is important, as it once again shows the refusal of difference that underlies the West's drive to create the whole world in its own image, and its willingness to annihilate those who resist.

Laura Agustín makes an interesting argument in relation to another side of globalisation - the lives of women migrant workers, particularly those in the sex industry. She argues that moral panics about trafficking divert attention away from the reality of most women migrants' lives, and can become yet another means of controlling them. In future issues of *Soundings* we hope to explore further issues of migration and borders, since the exploitation of 'illegal' labour, and the experience of living outside society's borders, are an integral part of the globalisation project.

The themed section for this issue is in fact very relevant for our critique of Blairism and the Third Way. Geoff Andrews has brought together a collection of essays which look at the importance of history for our understanding of the present. Implicit in these essays is the notion that the left may need to revise its way of interpreting the past - for example in rejecting a teleological view of progress, and in recognising the complexities and sometimes contingencies of events; but at the same time the contributors share the view that we are not at the end of history, and that the left does not need to junk everything from the past. There is a general sense that the past creates the conditions in which we currently live, and that an analysis of history is crucial for an understanding of politics. This view is worth restating at a time when our postwar history is constantly being rewritten - whether as a justification for invasion, or as an argument that the events of 1989 mean the end of any left project.

MR, SD