EDITORIAL

Taking on neo-liberalism

The bulk of this issue of *Soundings* is given over to our ongoing critique of neoliberalism and New Labour, but there is a new emphasis in many of the articles on what our political response should be to the entrenched nature of Blairism. Especially since London will be playing host to the European regional gathering of the World Social Forum in November 2004, we want to address questions of how we can actively oppose neo-liberalism (of course trying to analyse what forces are in play is one of the ways in which we do this).

For some contributors - most notably Jeremy Gilbert - there is no point in trying to persuade New Labour to change course. Jeremy argues that the analysis carried in *Soundings* and elsewhere has made it abundantly clear that New Labour is a neoliberal hegemonic project, and as such there can be no point in persuading them to think about alternative forms of social democracy. (Ruth Levitas also cogently makes the case for New Labour's total lack of interest in social democracy of any kind, and shows how the deep is the immersion in New Labour double talk of some of those who are trying to criticise the government.) For Jeremy, this means that initiatives such as Compass have missed the point. It is time to turn away from Labour and begin to organise active opposition. Critics within the Labour Party could be allies in such opposition, but they would have to be much clearer than currently about the nature of New Labour, and committed to much stronger opposition than has been so far been evident. The attempt to win small concessions - something that so often seems to bog down the trade union movement - is no substitute for campaigning for a complete change of direction. One could take issue with some of Jeremy's tactical recommendations, but his argument that we are nowhere without popular movements of resistance is timely.

Our roundtable discussion addresses the question of how to resist neoliberal globalisation from the point of view of looking at the connections between the global and the local. The contributors ask how we might organise politically to take account of the global influences on local places, but also the influence of

the local on the global. They look at some of the groups and campaigns that have been participating in the social forum movement and at some of the issues this kind of campaigning raises. For example, many popular or local movements have resisted aspects of corporate globalisation, but how can they make links with each other?; how do they relate to institutions of power (if at all)?; how can a sense of one's own place from which one resists also encompass a welcoming of diversity or adventure? These are all issues to which we plan to return.

Martin McIvor, in a short comment in response to some of the debates we have been carrying, points out that critical voices in the Labour Party are increasingly concerned about the government's lack of progress on what have hitherto been taken to be fairly non-controversial social democratic criteria - such as income equality and the health of the public realm. And he rightly argues the need for bridges between these voices and the new protest movements - and that any such dialogue would be greatly assisted by a more vibrant shared left culture. We are hoping that *Soundings* will play a role in developing this - in its discussions about the nature of New Labour and the global forces of neoliberalism, in helping to mobilise opposition and to provide a non-sectarian forum for thinking about how to effect change, and also in continuing to think about the politics that is everywhere in cultural life.

Thus in this issue, as well as the discussions on movements, we also continue our focus on resisting New Labour's ideological attack on the public sphere - in Catherine Needham's exploration of the effects of turning us all into customers, and in Mike Rustin's critique of dominant systems of public service audit. Mike's article is interesting in that it moves beyond critique to propose more constructive forms of inspection; this is a useful example of looking for places where the contradictions in public policy open up opportunities for contestation on the ground; engaging in a contestation about the ideas underlying a policy can then lead to alternatives being offered that have the potential to attract sufficient support to win change. Such strategies for change within institutions should be seen as complementary to other oppositional strategies.

Jo Littler's article on celebrity and meritocracy shows how popular culture helps to reproduce competitive individualism in its celebration of success, and of conspicuous consumption by the successful. This theme of popular culture and its role as a public sphere through which hegemonic and counter-hegemonic

values are in play is discussed by Jonathan Rutherford in the second part of this editorial. Jonathan and Jo are addressing another aspect of *Soundings* - our effort to think about politics through culture. This is a crucial part of the process of strengthening a common popular democratic culture.

We close with a tribute to one of the greatest public intellectuals of the twentieth century - Edward Said, a man for whom culture, theory and action were inseparable.

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COMMENTARY

Common life

The detective stories of Swedish writer Henning Mankell depict a hard working policeman, Kurt Wallander, recently divorced, struggling to come to terms with his middle age, and worrying over the dog days of social democracy. Faced with serial killers, organised crime and an increasingly commercialised society, his thoughts drift to a foreboding about the future: 'more and more people are being judged to be useless and flung to the margins of society'. How will he deal with the great uneasiness he feels at these changes?

I was half way through reading the fourth Wallander book when I visited the National Gallery to look at recent work by the American video artist Bill Viola. Viola is preoccupied with the kind of questions which punctuate Wallander's life: 'what is happening to us?', 'what kind of world is this?'. He tackles the big issues of the body, emotions, life and death. Over the years, Viola has produced some poignant images, which puzzle over issues of birth and mortality, and he has found a growing audience amongst the younger educated metropolitan middle classes, who are looking for a sense of meaningfulness in their lives but who hold little sympathy for organised religion.

Viola avoids the obfuscations of religious faith to present us with a kind of sacred humanism. In his latest work actors mime scenes from mediaeval religious paintings, expressing a range of emotions - anguish, joy, despair, sorrow. But the images seem contrived and unconvincing, exuding a specific white American, middle-class sensibility. As an interpretation of the human condition in all its

diversity they fall short. Viola appears unable to imagine other worlds beyond his own.

Soundings is a journal of politics, but one which recognises that people do not live by politics alone (certainly as it is normally understood). There are other questions that need asking, about ethics, about how we might live in relation to others and to society. Emile Durkheim described sacred things as being collective ideals that have fixed themselves on material objects, ideas and representations awakened in us by the spectacle of society. For Kurt Wallander, Sweden's social democratic traditions once provided this function. But his awareness of change, permeable borders, and the growing numbers of refugees, takes him in a different direction from Viola's righteous, conflict-free depiction of life. Wallander's disorientation and lack of answers are expressed in his memory of his dead colleague Rydberg. Confronted with an apparently insoluble crime, he wonders what words of advice his friend might have given - 'though knowing, even as he thinks this, that Rydberg too would be confounded by the new social realities'.

Faced with the spectacle of changing society, the left is confronted with a similar predicament. Where and what are the collective ideals? In societies which mistrust universal moralities, how are we to organise a democratic life which can manage both personal fulfilment and our obligations toward others? Singular explanatory narratives are proving to be very elusive. As Zygmunt Bauman has argued, these undecideables militate against simple solutions of for and against: 'They put paid to the ordering power of the opposition, and so to the ordering power of the narrators of the opposition. Oppositions enable knowledge and action, undecideables paralyse them.'[1]

There is no better example of the consequences of this paralysis than New Labour's embrace of the market. As if aware of its moral emptiness, Tony Blair's language, confronted by a world that he sees as 'changing at a bewildering speed', is filled with the need to hurry. 'There are no prizes for standing still', 'we cannot be complacent or rest on our laurels', 'we need continually to revise and revitalise our thinking'. Politics is about values that will 'drive us forward'**.** These values are 'progressive politics', 'providing economic opportunity', 'a modern civic society', 'a modern welfare state'. Modernise, progress, new, change, reform:

1. Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, Polity Press 1991, p56.

single words are joined up into catch-phrases - 'progressive renewal', 'renewing progressive politics', 'a new modern vision'. In the end, despite Blair's insistence that 'ideas are more important than ever', policy has become depoliticised and reduced to the technocratic functionalism of 'what works'.

Consequently, New Labour lacks a narrative to explain itself by; instead it parades before us a series of projects and initiatives which demonstrate that something is happening. For example, when he opened the Bexley Business Academy in Kent in 2003, Blair challenged critics of his reforms to come and look at the new school. The prestigious building was designed by Norman Foster, to criteria pioneered by education company 3Es, and with £2million in sponsorship from Sir David Garrard of property company Minerva plc. Garrard's image takes pride of place on the Business Academy website. The Academy is an International Baccalaureate Organisation World School - this is no bog-standard comprehensive. It is Blair's bold vision of what works. But this kind of project amounts to little more than expensive tinkering; and the public private partnerships involved in the setting up of City Academies merely create one-off opportunities for corporate philanthropy, and launch-pads for business interest in public sector services markets. And it is a kind of tinkering that fuels inequality, and distracts attention from the long-term decline in UK levels of public investment. Labour need more than this to address people's concerns about the future, and to find a language that imagines how we can all live together.

Paradoxically, this mixture of utilitarianism, liberal economics and the pursuit of the new has meant that New Labour now resembles more closely than any other political tradition that of nineteenth century whiggery. New Labour likes to describe itself as heir to the social liberalism of the Edwardian era - somewhere on the spectrum between the Liberal Asquith and the Socialist Keir Hardie. But this government has cast aside most of the history of labour politics, and has slid even further back in time. As with the Whigs, the championing of new markets and modernity is accompanied by a blind faith in their principal drivers - individual economic freedom and the accumulation of capital. The Whigs also saw science and enlightenment as co-existing quite easily with the colossal country estates of the rich, and the workhouses for the masses. As Karl Polanyi writes, this was an age in which the running of society was an adjunct of the market. 'Instead of economy being embedded in social relations, social relations

are embedded in the economic system'.[2] Echoes of this can be heard in Gordon Brown's enthusiasm for a post-welfare, enterprise culture. He told the CBI 2001 conference:

> I want every young person to hear about business and enterprise in school, every college student to know there are opportunities in business, every teacher to be able to communicate the virtues of enterprise … so encouraging a stronger pro-business, pro-enterprise, pro-wealth creating environment in our country.

New Labour has abandoned the idea of the public good. It has been seduced by the idea that neo-liberalism promotes individual choice. Its rhetoric can at times appear to mirror the individual struggle to create a personal identity - which has become the defining paradigm of how we live in Western cultures: we are called upon to invent our own identity and live in our own way and be true to ourselves. Yet to view the individual pursuit of self fulfilment and self determination as an individualised project subject only to rules of just conduct is mistaken. For individual identity expresses our two greatest - and incompatible - wants in life: freedom *and* security. We desire to experience our individual life as unique and meaningful to ourselves, but we equally feel a need to belong to, and define ourselves through, broader collectives. It is in our relationships with others - in what is constituted as the social - that we attempt to reconcile this paradox and make a sense of self that feels authentic. The intellectual poverty of neo-liberalism lies in its failure to recognise that individuals cannot be reduced to Homo Economicus. We are social and emotional beings and we need public discourses and spaces which can orchestrate, enable and symbolise commonalities which are the necessary framework for creating social cohesion and individual identity.

In the last decade new national and global public spaces have emerged which have enabled individuals to encounter one another in shared activity. Some have been very large: celebrations of the royal family; the countryside alliance march; the anti war demonstrations; England's rugby team victory. The anti-globalisation demonstrations mark an international collective oppositional

2. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, Beacon Press, 1957, p57.

politics to corporate capitalism. And reality TV shows like *Pop Idol* and *Big Brother* have revitalised virtual communities of TV watchers. These public spectacles frequently engage with moral debates, preoccupations with identity, social tolerance, and the political meaning of civic life.

What's more, reality TV often reveals a liberal public response. Michelle McManus, the 15-stone winner of *Pop Idol*, and Alex Parks, the young 'out' lesbian who won the 2003 *Fame Academy*, were supported by a public that is willing to think about difference and vote for it. Similarly, the most recent series of *Wife Swap* - for all the manipulation that was employed to make for entertaining TV - was a fascinating insight into contemporary gender relations, adult relationships with children and the democratising of family life.

Popular culture and mass public gatherings are assiduously cultivated by commercial interests and the right-wing press, which downplay their more radical and challenging elements. But New Labour, despite being progressive on many social issues, has not cultivated these elements to shape an alternative hegemony of the public, one that is open, outward-looking and tolerant. On the contrary, on key (conservative) issues such as crime and punishment, asylum and tax, it has promoted an idea of the public inherited from Thatcherism. New Labour strategist Phillip Gould has described himself as a populist: 'Any progressive party and progressive government should listen to the voice of the people … Labour is a people's party and the people's voice should be heard (*Guardian*, 24.8.99). But Gould's concept of the people appears to be a product of his own imagination, mixing his childhood memories with New Labour's disciplinary and utilitarian approach to modernisation. New Labour has fabricated a parochial, culturally conservative, homogeneous and self-absorbed public - one that has been privatised and left prone to fear, xenophobia and insecurity.

We need a different approach to popular politics - and here Hannah Arendt's notion of a common world is useful. In Arendt's account, we are born into a common world:[3] 'It transcends our lifespan into past and future alike; it was there before we came and will outlast our brief sojourn in it. It is what we have in common not only with those who live with us, but also with those who were

3. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, The University of Chicago Press, 1998, Chapter 2.

here before and with those who will come after.' But this historical collective sense of a common life can only survive to the extent it appears in public. Public life is where our specific individuality and locatedness is recognised; it is where we see 'sameness in utter diversity'. And, as Arendt argues: 'the privation of privacy lies in the absence of others', and is the cause of the 'mass phenomenon of loneliness'. The public realm is a gift of history, and a crucial task of a broad left popular politics is to recover it and articulate an idea of a common life and its sometimes incommensurable diversity.

Arendt's argument raises the question of ethics, since ethical life begins the moment we encounter others who are not reducible to ourselves, and realise that we must negotiate living in the world with them. Politics should not be confused with ethics. It is about compromise, negotiation, and hard decisions about the instrumental distribution of resources. But we need a democratic left politics which offers ways of articulating an ethics of commonality whose truths are the same for all. One which aspires to uphold individual integrity and a commonwealth of difference. The point of democratic participation is to create, rather than discover, common goods.

This is a task that the left in Britain has been tardy about addressing. A recent essay by *Prospect* editor David Goodhart - a self professed member of the liberal intelligentsia - is a dispiriting reminder of this timidity.[4] Goodhart argues that the growing diversity of British society (by which he means ethnic difference) is undermining its social cohesion and the values of solidarity which underpin the welfare state. Tellingly, his definition of the problem is borrowed from a Conservative politician, David Willets: 'The basis on which you can extract large sums of money in tax and pay it out in benefits is that most people think that the recipients are people like themselves, facing difficulties that they themselves could face. If values become more diverse, if lifestyles become more differentiated, then it becomes more difficult to sustain the legitimacy of a universal risk-pooling welfare state. People ask: "Why should I pay for them when they are doing things that I wouldn't do"'. Instead of rejecting this myth of an ahistorical, homogeneous, conflict-free national community, Goodhart, like New Labour, succumbs to it.

He justifies his argument by defining citizenship as not simply an abstract

4. David Goodhart, 'Discomfort of Strangers', *The Guardian*, February 24 , 2004.

idea of rights and obligations, but as something that 'we' are born into: 'When politicians talk about the "British people" they refer … to a group of people with a special commitment to one another'. His romanticised image of national community distracts attention from the one group who are guilty of breaking with the values of solidarity - the wealthy. It is the rich who exclude themselves from paying taxes and who are increasingly opting out of all forms of collective social provision. In Britain, it is class inequality, not racial differences, that threaten the fabric of society and notions of solidarity.

However the left cannot evade the issue of racism if it is to successfully revive the idea of the public good. Each of us is born with a past, and the stories of our lives are partly the stories of the communities from which we derive our identity. We are part of history and the bearers of a tradition. But as the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre persuasively argues, we are not bound by their moral and political limitations. They are the places from which we begin and from where we move forward. Our personal aspirations and engagement with others change our identities and the traditions we have grown from. As MacIntyre argues: 'Traditions, when vital, embody continuities of conflict. When a tradition becomes unchanging and fixed, it is always dying or dead.'[5]

JR

5. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, Duckworth 1999, p222.