

Public life

In this issue we look at public life - an area whose wellbeing is intimately affected by the encroachment of the market into all areas of our lives. If our sense of the public interest is eroded, our ability to imagine alternatives to the market is fatally weakened. Equally, our lack of imagination about rethinking the public serves to reinforce market dogmatists.

For New Labour, rethinking the public has been synonymous with its marketisation: the years of defeat led to a loss of all confidence in any alternative way of organising things. The experience of many of us who are continuing critics of the market is that, while New Labour appears to share with us a realisation of the shortcomings of markets, its severest criticism is directed against us: a large part of its energy goes in explaining why there is no alternative to the market, and working out how to adapt itself to its processes of calculation and cost benefit.

In this issue we have two main lines of response to this. Firstly, we have a set of three articles which rethink the public in relation to how public goods are produced. Robin Murray, Hilary Cottam and Heather Wakefield, in different ways, show how this focus allows us to think a little more widely about the available resources for change and modernisation. Our second response is to continue to describe the ways in which marketisation itself eats away at public life, so that promoting it as a way of rethinking the public is a self-defeating strategy.

As Robin Murray puts it, in thinking about public life, we need to sometimes shift away from issues of consumption and exchange, towards re-conceptualising how we organise the production of our general needs. He points to ways in which new thinking can transform service delivery, so that it becomes more flexible and decentralised, and uses the skills and ideas of the workforce rather than imposing archaic forms of centralised control that stifle initiative. (A big difference here from New Labour's version of centrally controlled decentralisation is that it sees the workforce as key local agents.) Hilary Cottam illustrates how this can work in the prison service. Heather Wakefield shows

how a re-evaluation of the skills - and emotional labour - of the huge numbers of women working in the public sector could transform our thinking about local government. As Robin Murray also points out, much of the subcontracting out of public works goes to parts of the private sector that are distinctly unmodern - their Fordist approach to organisation means they rely on cutting labour costs for their 'efficiency' savings, and their command structures make them unable to embrace change generated from the workforce. As Heather Wakefield argues, thinking about and valuing the lives of the workforce is probably the best route for the modernisation of our services.

The way that market dogmatism undermines public life is well illustrated in Jonathan Hardy's article. He describes how - in the double-shuffle manner to which we are becoming accustomed - Labour's warm professions of commitment to public sector broadcasting are being relentlessly accompanied by the systematic introduction of the market mechanism across the whole sector. A continuation of these trends would turn the BBC into a 'market failure' backwater, and make the licence fee indefensible. Those pursuing this destruction of a public institution seem to have no way of conceptualising its public role; so instead they resort to thinking of it as something which plugs gaps where the market fails. And because their understanding of it as a public asset is so weak, they find it difficult to justify collective funding through the licence fee.

Judith Squires also details how a public good - in this case the institutional framework for the promotion of equality - can be transformed in its encounter with market-saturated thought. She argues that the government's approach to equality is weakened by its 'equal treatment' (i.e. meritocratic) approach, but perhaps more profoundly by its (related) propensity to articulate the equality agenda in terms of economic productivity. It is possible that its stated mission to promote equality will be entirely vitiated by this focus on eliminating obstacles to the efficient working of the economy. Her argument is that at the moment Labour policy contains within itself a genuine potential to promote an equality agenda, but its contradictory elements mean that the more neo-liberal aspects of its policy may become predominant.

Judith's article is part of a wider debate about the ways in which New Labour is delivering on its social democratic (and as Stuart Hall suggests, subordinate) agenda. In this issue we publish other responses to this debate, including a

defence by Neal Lawson of the Compass approach. We also carry debates on the role of intellectuals more widely, and of Demos specifically. Since we are trying to continue and develop a specific part of the intellectual left's legacy, these debates are important to *Soundings*.. As Sarah Benton argues in her commentary which follows this introduction, much of the left's habitat has disappeared, but many of its concerns - in particular the relationships between parties, states and economic interests - remain crucial. We plan to continue these debates in future issues.

A third possible response to the global expansion of markets, of course, is to resist them on the ground. This issue carries a number of pieces on global anti-capitalist resistance. We publish two responses from activists to our discussion in the last issue on the global and the local, and on the anti-corporate globalisation movement. We also have a trio of pieces from South America, where resistance to the US, IMF and World Bank seems to be growing. As Silvia Pritz writes, in the South people are beginning to be able to imagine how to live in a country that is not dominated from outside.

Silvia Pritz also asks those of us who live in the North to imagine what it would be like if we lived in a country that did not dominate others. Amir Saeed describes his complex response to the attacks on the rest of the world by those in the North who are incapable of comprehending such a notion. He describes his journey from a political identification as black (in the 1980s inclusive and resistant sense) to seeing himself as belonging to the ummah. Amir's Jihad is 'for a progressive Islam centred on inclusion of all disparaged groups (regardless of religion, ethnicity and even sexuality)'. This shift in identification is a response to an orchestrated hostility towards Islam (including the amalgam of an asylum-seeker/Muslim/terrorist bogeyman) in both Europe and America. It is an understandable shift, and can be seen as an attempt to produce an alternative public space for resistance. It is also an indictment of the capitulation by the government to populist bigotry, and its wider failure to construct a democratic and inclusive public definition of the space of the nation.

Our new cover design is part of a longer term relaunching of *Soundings* as a public forum for debate about the future of the democratic left. Our aim is to explore the intellectual resources available for new thinking, and to focus on the issues which will challenge and give shape to the development of a broad

left radical democracy. Issue 28 *Frontier Markets* will look at the global incursion of commodity relations into what were formerly non-market spheres of life. Issue 29 *After Identity* will look at the individualisation of society and assess the impact and future of identity politics and the ethic of self fulfilment. Issue 30 *The Good Life* will argue for a new human centred approach to economics. We want to influence the future by developing our tradition of left democracy. Please join in the debates, and send us your ideas and comments on the journal. You can contact us at editorial@lwbooks.co.uk.

SD

COMMENTARY

Critical intellectuals in the post-socialist world

And with one bound we were free. The cold war ended. The Berlin wall came down. We anticipated the peace dividend, financing love and fruitfulness.

It took me some time after these cataclysmic events to understand how much I, we, the left, had depended on the organised hatreds of the cold war. And how so much that we had taken for granted in placing ourselves in the world - as the enemy within capitalism - was contingent on the cold war. How bewildering, that when this division of the world - against which we had railed all our lives - came to an end, we too should become displaced persons. The 'we', 'us', 'our', here are political intellectuals aged between 30 and 90, our habitat being capitalist democracy in the cold war, childhoods lived under the shadow of a great war. It used to be that anybody could be a political intellectual, as long as they accepted the importance of theory (usually Marxist), of thinking, and of taking positions. In this definition, Billy Bragg and Arthur Scargill were as much intellectuals as were academics Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Jacqueline Rose. We assumed that to be an intellectual you had to be left-wing, because thought and reason would demonstrate that capitalism was, a priori, a cruel and unjust and degrading system. This airy assumption came particularly easily in Britain, where intellectuality is not valued and only the left has honoured it. Creative left-wing intellectuals were the kings of this world. I wouldn't say it was a narcissistic world, though: the sense that at the core of politics were relationships between very different beings was too strong. It goes without saying that it was a fractious and disputatious world, and floated on an unspoken arrogance: left-wing intellectuals alone were groping towards the truth.

Inter-war intellectuals had the *New Statesman*, *Political Quarterly*, Left Book clubs; the post-'68 generation had *New Left Review*, and later *Marxism Today*, *Feminist Review*, *Race and Class* ... indeed more journals in the 1970s and 1980s than Central Books could fit into a pantechinon. The 'truth' path was travelled not by solitary study but in company with whoever was struggling or oppressed.

It was taken for granted amongst this group that Labour was not a socialist party and was not likely ever to become one, but that a Labour government was always to be desired as a move forward in a war of position. Most left-wing intellectuals supported the electoral victory of the Labour Party as the only way of blocking a destructive Conservative Party, and as the best first step towards a more radical change. Those same intellectuals have always felt betrayed by any Labour government, however - not because they have gone back on their promises, but because they have betrayed the intellectuals' own view of what they wanted to happen.

The categories we used to analyse the world, and every single thing within it, were the formations of class, state and party, within the overall framework of the capitalist system. In this sense, much that we said and did during the three decades after the ending of the second world war would have been recognised by our pre-war grandparents. The formal cold war began in 1946-7, but fear and hostility towards the Soviet Union had powered popular as well as ruling-class political feeling since 1917. The paradigm of two opposing blocks was so powerful that every new phenomenon - Tupperware or Elvis Presley, television or apartheid - could be fitted into it. Alternative ideas, such as the unstoppable power of individual desire, were not entertained. Within this world there were no authentic reactionaries among the oppressed, only those who had been gulled by the wrong leaders. Concepts which are fashionable now - especially the notion of totalitarianism as a way of describing a political-legal system - were rebuffed by most of the intellectual left. Such a concept fell outside the categories. Indeed, it held them up to question. But, through the free market, new things jostled faster and faster into our lives, and had to be conceptually crammed into a model of the capitalist system, always reflecting how it worked, what its power dynamics were. The walls enclosing us began to crack under the pressure.

Some then persisted in committing the worst thought-crime of the era's declining years - reductionism: there was nothing in life except the flaunting or

hiding of economic interest. This was a response it was easy to scorn. In the reductionist world-view, for instance, a novel was good if it advanced the working-class cause - Tressell's *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* was the acme of a list that included Zola and Upton Sinclair - or if it displayed the moral turpitude of the bourgeoisie - Marx was reputed to have admired Balzac for this reason. All else was either bourgeois self-indulgence or a function of the bourgeoisie's desire to dope the working class with trivia. There was no such thing as imagination.

Others, embracing the marvellous complexity of things, were released from the old categories, to be swept up by the irrefutable evasions of post-modernism; a preoccupation with form, language, symbolism, fantasy, began to sever the connection between intellectuals and politics and the oppressed. In place of the old nostrum - both upper-class and revolutionary in tradition - that the duty of intellectuals was to serve the working class, this approach seemed to propose that intellectuals had a duty only to intellectuality. That was narcissistic.

Others embraced the infinite hinterland of the individual through psychotherapy or spiritual expression. That too could be a retreat from the world. Still, the unspoken assumptions about the leading role of political intellectuals persisted while our habitat survived. It did, that is, until the miners' strike. Then the defeat of the miners signalled the flattening of the obstacles before Thatcher's third triumphal re-entry to power.

The end of a habitat

The unsteady march of labour in Britain through the twentieth century had depended on trade unions. The relationship between unions and political parties created and nourished a swathe of intellectuals; trade union research and education departments, Ruskin College, the WEA, all educated a distinctively British form of political intellectual. These places, along with a cacophony of conferences organised by political parties and groups - free, or very cheap, unlike today - created a continuous political education for the willing. They were creative and fruitful, and sectarian, dogmatic and self-deluding. It was this world that could not survive the many things which Thatcherism represented, including a quite passionate hatred of the left, and the vitiation of state, party

and class both as actual forms and as forms of meaning.

A self-delusion had enveloped much of the left by the 1980s - many were blind to, amongst other things, the attractions of commercial, consumer society, or the desire to be sexually attractive, or to have a home and family. I still remember the shock when I first went to a Tory Party conference as a journalist in the early 1980s, to discover not only that the women did not have blue rinses, but also the degree of vituperation, fear and visceral loathing that was felt for people like me. None of the left's analysis up to the end of the 1970s equipped us for the increasingly bold assaults of 1980s conservatism. Significantly, the two seminal, though very different, critiques of the left's positions by Eric Hobsbawm (*The Forward March of Labour Halted*) and Stuart Hall (*the Great Moving Right Show*) - as well as speeches and writings by socialist feminists such as Beatrix Campbell and Anna Coote - pointed to the dislocation between the left's paradigm of progress and the actuality of how people lived, thought and bought. They pointed to what many people knew but, as it were, didn't know they knew.

The miners' defeat was an emotional shock, but only a surprise if you refused to see why the right wanted to destroy the NUM, and what it was doing to ensure its victory. In fact, since at least 1926 miners had represented, at best, stalwart endurance, noble defeat. They were not, and never had been, heroic leaders. They had never been assigned the vanguard role by socialist propagandists. (That role had traditionally belonged to the engineers who alone - through the quintessentially British form of the shop stewards movement, itself led by the Communist Party - had the potential to undercut the power of the employers ... if only the CPGB were not so staid and pro-Soviet.) Neither in 1972 nor 1984 were the miners challenging capitalism. The miners were pitted against the state which owned the industry; and, while the left depended on the steady march of corporatism, of a state which would engineer compromises in order to survive, the mission of the Conservative government was to end that role for the state. In the 1970s, with Heath as prime minister, when the social democratic consensus still held, such a challenge by the miners was not hubristic. And throughout the 1970s, successive union challenges to the state had fed an illusion that the state, somehow severed from the business class, was infinitely capacious and could be re-formed to accommodate a politically ambitious trade union movement. In our theory the state was not neutral, but its function was to

prevent destructive class conflict, which it could only do through compromise. It was this belief that Thatcher laid waste to: the shock was the scale of her political ambitions. And the dismay at Thatcher's rhetorical, and in part practical, onslaught on the role of the state was hugely intensified by the realisation that many people shared her hostility. We had thought - probably rightly - that desire can be aroused and channelled to attainable objects - lots of people will do things, vote for things, sign up for things as well as buy things, because of effective propaganda. But I, at least, never accepted that desires for more money, more freedom, more individual expression, were legitimate and were ceaselessly renewable. The Conservative claim that these expressed 'human nature' was anathema to me. I was knocked over by the popular rush, albeit a middle-class rush, to buy private shares in once state enterprises. That, and a working-class steady surge to buy once council-owned houses, changed property relations and consolidated Thatcher's contumely for state ownership. Like the eighteenth century enclosures of common land that created a new class of market land-owner, so the 1980s enclosures of once common state property created a new class of small traders in the property markets.

Thatcher's hatred for the socialist intellectuals who staffed unions, some media organisations, the voluntary sector, even the Church of England, was even more ferocious, if less public. These enemies appeared as a target in, for instance, the 'poverty lobby', which, according to her ministers, was distorting the state and public sector and actually forcing working-class people into dependence on the state. The anti-Tories were completely disarmed by these events.. In response to the blitzkrieg there was a fatal fracturing of social democratic consensus about the state, and weakness and division among trade unions, with the Labour Party frozen in an old rhetoric of socialist bravery in a modern era of centralised professional politics. Much of the left was locked in a febrile competition to win positions, posts, clauses within its own shrinking circles, oblivious to the causes of its own failures and to how society was changing around it. No popular uprising met Thatcher's cavalier abolition of the GLC: the radical 'new social movements' who formed its key constituency - women's, gay, black and anti-racist - had scant theoretical or practical links to trade unions or political parties.

The reliable assumptions of our world disappeared in the 1980s. The disappearances rang the death-knell of socialism and our categorical imperatives.

British society today would seem unrecognisable to our ancestors. The relations of class, party, state, all had shifted out of their grooves by the 1980s. By the twenty-first century the categories no longer seemed salient. What do they explain? What do they have to say about race, about the media, about Arab nations? Drifting in a world of property-based TV programmes - do up your house, sell your house, buy another house, build a house, deck up your garden - and of market-based injunctions of 'free choice' rather than collective decisions or state direction, what role do political intellectuals have?

The state and its relationships

And yet, in the echelons where decisions do get taken, class, state and party are still key categories. Why else does the middle class pay heavily to get its children the 'right' education, if class does not matter? Racism is part of the answer, but it's working-class non-white children whom they cannot assimilate into their aspirations. Why do corporations continuously disrupt the economic life of nations if not in a restless search for the most exploitable workforce? Why do sharp businessmen press money on Labour if it is not the party/state connection that matters?

There is a disconnect between these forces and the old political language. Either they actually do not describe a reality which people recognise, or there is a mass reluctance to acknowledge a reality which is so at odds with a world of 'free choice'. Instead we have a horribly impoverished language in which all power - over all aspects of the state, of the economy - is exercised by a small homogenous group of people called 'politicians', all of whom are corrupt self-serving idiots. No Rupert Murdoch, indeed no media at all, no giant corporations, no property developers, no Yes Minister and no civil service, army or police force, no difference between parties or individual MPs, in short a vision of the world drained of substance, colour, reality and all passion except contempt.

Politics in our times operates outwith demotic connections. That is as true of the Conservative Party as it is of Labour. The small-town shop owner, the rural squirearchy, the big business magnates, who for a century provided a pyramid of solid support for the Tories, have also flaked away. The class dynamic of capitalism is no longer nation-based, and this strips out much of the meaning of belonging to national political parties. New Labour has tried to commandeer many of the ways in which intellectuals articulated the failures of the past; but,

having effectively severed connections to party and class - which were in any case withering away - it now only has the state as the medium for reform. National British capitalism and its owners have moved out of shot. Attacks on the owners or managers of British businesses are heard only when the business is fulfilling a quasi-state service, such as rail contractor Jarvis or the mutually owned Equitable Life. Attacks on any owners of capital are rare, except for occasional bogeymen like Rupert Murdoch (which is not to belittle his power or its malign effects), or anonymous CEOs sheltering behind their slippery brand names. The mass unemployment of the 1980s made the survival of capitalism in Britain a common necessity. People clung to 'their' companies as the nightmare of a life on the dole returned. Manufacturing companies which kept going in Britain gained the warm patina of heroic patriotism. In place of capitalism, government itself has become the only character in political debate. We talk a pretend language in which everything that happens or doesn't happen is the responsibility of government, specifically of cabinet ministers, and then we attack government for sham, pretence and hollowness. We talk and talk about the 'public sector' as though it is synonymous and coterminous with the state. It is not. We have no coherent view of the state and what its various relations to trans-national and national businesses are, to the government of the day, and to various groups of 'clients'. This, it seems to me, is overwhelmingly the most important political question for political people. It is certainly the site of most popular political feeling. Popular right-wing politics are centred on the state: resentment, envy, bitterness about people who 'take advantage', 'take us for mugs' by manipulating the British state to provide them with undeserved benefits and status. The calumny of Political Correctness is bedded on the belief that public bodies have been manoeuvred into enforcing dictates that go against a 'natural' hierarchy of race, gender, fitness. 'Fair' state benefits of all sorts have succeeded the idea of equal wartime sacrifice as the totem of British citizenship. The *Daily Mail* and the BNP would have no-one at their hate feasts if they could not dish up 'abuses' of the public purse to benefit the undeserving and 'politically correct'.. Are they deluded? Yes, in that they never call to account the corporations whose abuse of nation states, exploitation of the powerless and manipulation of the gullible (think Fox TV in the USA compared with the BBC) far outstrips anything that politically correct - i.e. decent - intellectuals might persuade the British state to do. No, in that, while corporations have

learned to hide, especially when no-one is looking for them, many of the services provided by the state in any country have to be on view.

One of the ironies of the right following Reagan and Thatcher was that they claimed that the only role for the state was to provide a legal framework in which private capitalism operated. One result of this is that, even when a private company is clearly at fault (see Jarvis or Equitable Life), it is the state's failure to regulate which is blamed. So the state now functions to keep consumers and private providers apart.

A key relationship here is between the state and the media. With much of the functioning of the state hidden from view, good journalism relies on leaks and serious research to expose what it is hidden. If the departments of health and education are relatively exposed, the departments of work and pensions, immigration, trade, defence and foreign affairs house huge hidden labyrinths of deniable dealings and dubious contracts. Too often we have bad journalism that hunts in a pack for the weak MP of the day, as though that explains or changes anything.

We don't have a theory through which consumers could take the lead in creating a more fair and decent society. But there are some signs of life from this area - enhancing consumer choices into agencies of ethical action is something which has created a new generation of intellectuals in the voluntary and environmental sectors. And these groups have ancestors in the pre-Thatcherite political movement. Some psychotherapists - a group long defensively immune to the clamour of the political forum - have moved out of their hierarchical structure, allowing some scientists of human desire to raise their voices in political forums. This would not have happened had it not been for the women's movement realising that women's oppression could not be explained simply in class terms, or without the work of then-socialist intellectuals such as Juliet Mitchell. Every new conjuncture in human society produces its intellectuals, though their numbers and the degree of authority and freedom with which they work obviously varies. The profound difference now, compared with twenty years ago, is that no group of intellectuals is hegemonic, and few of them have a lived working relationship with those who are also essential agents of change in society. The selling of mass higher education, absorbing working-class intellectuals and academics alike in a standardised profession called Academic Qualifications, has removed intellectual work from its sanctified path

of 'service to the movement'.. Those who have found no home in universities have found them in think tanks or consultancies, which survive by selling their services in the market, or to New Labour. There is a horde of thinking, researching individuals who post their thoughts and findings on web pages. What does not exist are the collective forums in which people meet, learn, change, plan, act. It's like a bubble bath, foaming with energy, but with no group or person inside their bubble being able to mingle with another. This is particularly, urgently true, of the gulf that exists between Muslim intellectuals in Europe and the traditional atheists of the European left.

The disappearance of the old axis of state, party and class has rendered all collective forums, including parliament, almost powerless. It has left the Labour Party dependent on the media charm of Tony Blair. Labour MPs respond not to their constituencies, but to his ephemeral charisma, which allows him to bond with George Bush with parliamentary backing. The opaque network of secret intelligence, private corporations and the military which is busy trying to re-engineer the nature of Middle Eastern states and resources has escaped any accountability to a bewildered British citizenry. We do have resources - of intelligence, goodwill and energy - which lie dormant in many of us for lack a purpose. An engaged critical intelligentsia for our age will only emerge when we can make new relationships with each other, putting mutual dependence and respect before the need to be right.

SB