

Frontier markets

'Frontier markets' is a way of describing the places where the boundaries between different forms of provision are most under contestation.¹ These boundaries have been redrawn over the centuries, as western business conducts its tireless search for new markets - not only through extending trade geographically but also through the extension of market relations to more and more areas of life. In this issue a number of contributors explore some of the political and social implications of this drive to draw every aspect of life into the commercial embrace.

Bronwen Morgan focuses on struggles over a basic human need - water - to show the contradictory aspects of its life as a frontier commodity. Since it is such a basic need, people instinctively recoil from the idea that commercial exchange should govern its delivery; but, as she points out, water provision requires the kind of infrastructure that in a globalised world is increasingly regarded as being properly provided by private companies rather than locally accountable bodies. Bronwen explores the complex implications this has for global activism.

Brendan Martin looks at different models of the public/private boundary in service provision in a number of different countries. He argues that we need to be clearer about what the conditions are for a flourishing of public life, and move away from a wilful refusal to see the limits of market mechanisms.

Liz Moor looks at the ways in which the prevalence of brands and branding means that commodities make up an increasing part of our sense of identity. As she argues, our concept of personhood has been bound up with property since at least the time of John Locke, but the commercialisation of collective and individual identity formation has now reached new levels. She also draws attention to the ways in which critics of branding and consumerism can sometimes be oblivious to their own

1. For previous *Soundings* articles on this contestation, see in particular articles by Stuart Hall, Alan Finlayson, Richard Minns and Jonathan Rutherford in *Soundings* 24, *A market state?*

investments in consumer-defined identities.

David Purdy usefully reminds us of how acutely Marx analysed commodity production and its drive for expansion. He argues that we need to remind ourselves about the fact that large parts of our life continue to exist outside the business nexus, and are indeed better served by other forms of production. In the postwar period, support for the mixed economy was an explicit recognition that certain goods and services were better provided through the public sector, but neo-liberals have sought to roll back the growth of public provision. David also argues that we should more explicitly recognise and defend at least two other non-commodity producing sectors of the economy - the household sector and the voluntary sector.

Chantal Mouffe and Richard Johnson, in very different ways, look at some of the international aspects of the attempt to establish a neo-liberal world order. Just as David Purdy is arguing for a plural view of economic life, Chantal is arguing for recognition of the plural character of international relations. Taking to task those who appear to think that major antagonisms no longer exist at global level (and that western neo-liberalism is the only possible/acceptable condition of existence for modernity), she argues that unless there are places where dissent can be collectively expressed at a global level, violence based on the battle of absolutes will continue. Richard Johnson shows how gender is inextricably bound up with the absolute moral certainty that underpins the drive for a world order based on American values. He shows how Bush and Blair continue the traditions of the wild frontier, with all the violence and brutality that that entails.

In other articles in this issue, Michèle Sedgwick and Judith Rugg look at the transformation of a particular corner of Spain into a commodified tourist space; Alessandra Buonfino shows how EU member states, torn between their need for labour power and their panic about foreigners and terrorists, are unable to agree a rational policy on migration; George Irvin argues for a rejection of dogmatic neo-liberalism in European economic policy; Csaba Deák looks at the difficult task of trying to rebuild Brazil, a country whose recent economic disasters stand as an indictment of neo-liberal policies; and *Soundings* editors Jonathan Rutherford and Michael Rustin discuss the future prospects of social democracy, both of them

recognising how crucial to its survival a defence of pluralism will be.²

The issue closes with two pieces on the USA. Norman Birnbaum traces the fortunes of the New Deal legacy, showing how it has been buffeted and battered but arguing that it is still a legacy that needs defending. And Stefan Howald interviews Richard Rorty, whose view of American politics is even more pessimistic, but who still argues that the current course was not inevitable, and that our actions can still therefore make a difference.

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2. These articles formed the basis of the *Soundings* readers meeting in October. The future of social democracy was also the subject of the *Soundings* session at the Compass conference 'A third term worth fighting for'. This is all part of an ongoing discussion feeding into our tenth anniversary conference and special issue.

Future *Soundings* reader and contributor meetings at the Tavistock Centre, London, will be held on the mornings of Saturday 11 December this year and 5 March 2005.

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