EDITORIAL

Living well

In this issue of *Soundings*, almost all the contributors write about the ways we live our lives. Many of the anxieties and problems of twenty-first century life in the post-industrial part of the world remain unaddressed by mainstream and traditional left politics - for example problems such as mental illness, insecurity, over-work, social marginalisation. When New Labour does try to address such issues, they often resort to the idiom of discipline, whether this takes the form of a banal endorsement of banning hoodies from public spaces, or the authoritarian impulse behind the imposition of identity cards. Contributors in this issue try to find alternative ways of grappling with some of these questions. There are two main sets of arguments here. The first set can be characterised as arguments aimed at displacing narrow neo-liberal concerns from the central place they hold in decision-making about all areas of life. Fiona Williams argues that we should place the concept of care at the centre of political decision-making. She explores the political implications of displacing the dominating themes of work and consumption from their central position in the 'hard-working families' agenda. Hetan Shah outlines the political implication of a well-being approach, and suggests some ways in which it might link to a left agenda. He makes the important point that what we decide to measure as a mark of progress in society will itself be a major determinant of policy. Andrea Westall develops this point in her exploration of alternative resources for economics, arguing that we need to move away from the limited agendas of traditional economics. Molly Scott Cato writes from a green economic perspective, arguing that we should focus our attention on the question of control over our jobs and our working lives - including our household and caring work. This first set of arguments continues the exploration of alternative economic philosophies and policies that was begun in *Soundings* 29 with Edward Fulbrook's article on post autistic economics. We will continue this theme in the next issue, with articles by David Purdy on post materialism and left political economy, and James Robertson on money. The second set of articles continues the discussion on identity from *Soundings* 29. Identity politics addresses questions about how we define ourselves (and in many cases how we resist the definition of others); its emergence on to (parts of) the left agenda through the identity movements and cultural analysis of

the 1970s and 1980s helped to extend critical political thought to embrace a much wider agenda than hitherto. These wider forms of politics are a crucial resource for resisting the narrow focus of neo-liberalism - which is restricted both in its political aims, and in the impoverished view it takes of the individual. Farhad Dalal, arguing from a perspective informed by group analysis, looks at the often invisible ways through which people in institutions perpetuate racial inequality; he shows how the dynamics of groups contribute to racialisation processes - and thus offers compelling evidence that an equality agenda based on individual rights will never be able to get to grips with what goes on inside institutions. Tom Shakespeare tracks some of the changes in the disability movement over the last thirty years, and argues that the old model of disability identity politics, largely based on valorising the self-identity of the disabled, could sometimes lead to the reinforcement of barriers; he argues for a 'wider, looser, more dynamic and self-critical disability community', working for inclusion and recognition in the wider society. Nira Yuval-Davis looks at problems in contemporary theories of cosmopolitanism, evoking some of the difficulties that arise from its parallels with universalism; she argues that it is important not to seek to obliterate difference, particularly from an assumed position of detachment. Her exploration of how these concerns link to debates within theories of human rights is complex and illuminating. Finally, Jacqueline Rose's article on the spirit of Zionism (extracted from her recent book) provides fascinating insights into the relationship between nations and the psyche.

Elsewhere in the issue, Ken Worpole looks at another issue that affects the quality of our lives, in looking at ways in which architecture can contribute to more humane cities. Stephan Harrison writes on climate change in Kazakhstan, offering compelling evidence of global warming, and showing the serious effects it has for many people in regions not often recognised as under threat. John Gittings provides analysis of changes currently underway in China, and Michael Rustin looks at what lies ahead for New Labour in its third term.

The next issue of *Soundings* will be the tenth anniversary issue and will look to the future. The focus will be on children and young people, with articles by Lisa Harker on childcare, Madeleine Bunting and Rowan Williams on the politics of childhood, and a roundtable discussion on girlhood. There will also be debate about the future of the left from, amongst others, Lawrence Grossberg and Martin McIvor.

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How we live now

Jonathan Rutherford

I was using a Barclays Bank cash machine, my card was ejected, and as I waited for the money a strap line flashed up on the screen: 'Open the door to your dreams'. My money rolled out and then it was gone, replaced by the image of an open door. It reminded me of a recent Lloyds Bank leaflet that asked: 'How can we help you live your life?' Capitalism offers us more than material goods. It promises us the good life - dreams, hope, love, a secure future. It has provided majorities in the industrialised countries with historically unprecedented levels of affluence and individual choice. In the last thirty years, Gross Domestic Product has almost doubled in the UK. But its profit-seeking activities are a colonising force which threatens the substantiality and continuity of social relations. The market reconstitutes connections between people as economic relations between individuals and things. It has created a tantalising world of commodity consumption that makes people feel lonely, dissatisfied and insecure.

Standards of living are increasingly defined by the purchasing of status giving, positional goods. Their value diminishes as more people acquire them, creating a spiralling of consumption as people strive to maintain their social standing. To fuel this dynamic and boost demand, finance capitalism has disconnected consumer desire from individual available earnings by aggressively selling consumer credit. In July 2004, consumer debt exceeded £1 trillion in Britain, of which £183.6 billion was unsecured debt on personal loans, credit and store cards.[1] In recent years, personal loans have expanded into the sub prime and home loan markets, charging exorbitant interest rates to the poor who no longer have access to welfare benefits. With its relentless pursuit of profit, capitalism is a revolutionary force without morality. As Joseph

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1. Credit Action, 'Debt Statistics', March 2005, www.creditaction.org.uk.

Schumpeter warned us, we should fear its success as much as its failure. Capitalism's 'creative destruction', and the spiralling of status seeking consumption amongst a small minority of the global population, is shattering the ecological fabric of the earth. It is unsustainable.

What about the failure of capitalism? As manufacturing industry continues its decline and retail sales and house prices begin to fall, the affluent amongst us can be reminded of the havoc it wreaks. Between 1980 and 1999, the richest 1 per cent of the UK population increased its share of national income from around 6 per cent to 13 per cent.[2] In 2002, this 1 per cent owned approximately 25 per cent of the UK's marketable wealth. In contrast, 50 per cent of the population shared only 6 per cent of total wealth.[3] Exclude housing from these estimates, and inequality increases even further. In 2000, 50 per cent of families had £600 or less in savings, and 25 per cent were £200 or more in debt.[4] Large sections of the working class, particularly in the post industrial towns of the north, and ethnic minorities, have been condemned to generations of gruelling poverty, crime and hopelessness. And even for the relatively affluent, debt is reducing many to a state of indentured consumption and a future tied to unremitting work. However much we accumulate in the way of worldly goods, there remains a fear without an object. An anxiety about 'something which is nothing'. What is left that is durable and trustworthy?

The penetration of market relations into the social fabric of people's lives has generated a set of 'post-material' social problems - widespread mental ill health, systemic loneliness, growing numbers of psychologically damaged children, eating disorders, obesity, alcoholism, drug addiction, compulsions to shop, spend and accumulate things, the breakdown of relationships and marriages. Thus, for example, the cost of mental health problems in the UK is estimated at £93 billion a year, in lost productivity, health care spending and reductions in quality of life.[5] Stress, anxiety and depression

2. Institute of Public Policy Research, *The State of the Nation*, August 2005.
3. National Statistics, 'Share of the Wealth', www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=2.
4. James Banks, Zoe Smith, Matt Wakefield, *The Distribution of Financial Wealth in the UK: Evidence from 2000 BHPS Data*, Institute of Fiscal Studies, WP02/21, 2002, p7, www.ifs.org.uk. See also Mike Brewer et al, *Poverty and Inequality in Britain: 2004*, Commentary 96, www.ifs.org.uk.
5. Mental Health Foundation, *Time for Public Mental Health: A briefing from the Mental Health Foundation in advance of the White Paper on Public Health*, 2004, www.mentalhealth.org.uk.

account for a third of all working days lost. A survey of 17,000 people by the charity Mind found that 20 per cent of respondents found work 'very' or 'extremely' stressful.[6] A conservative estimate of the cost to the NHS of alcohol related conditions is as much as £1.7 billion per annum.[7] 'Mental disorders' are now among the leading causes of world disease and disability. The World Health Organisation predicts that by 2020 depression will rank second behind heart disease as a 'leading cause of the global disease burden'. A survey on sleep undertaken by the Future Foundation reveals that one in four people in the UK are finding it difficult to sleep well. The biggest cause of sleep disorders is anxiety. Women coping with paid work, housework and childcare suffer more than men. The survey's project manager, Brian Garvey, in an attempt to explain the findings, said: 'Fear has become a powerful tool in society. A nervousness permeates our current lives' (*Observer*, 13.3.05).

Stress, depression, breakdown, bullying, violence might appear to have their source in dysfunctional individuals, but they are dysfunctions that belong to the wider social network. Social life is not external to inner psychological reality; its matrix of conscious and unconscious communications form the innermost being of individual personality. Shame, failure, feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness and meaninglessness are our modern dreads, and they arise in the class, family and social relations that we grow up in. After three decades of the neo-liberal economic order, we are a society that is beset by loss; loss of belonging, loss of political purchase on the world, loss of hope. We live in a paradox. We are collectively, politically inert, yet we exist in a state of continuous activity, whipped on by the exhortation to be 'hard working families'. Companies are re-engineered, institutions re-configured, departments re-organised, working practices reviewed, schools repeatedly inspected, employees monitored and appraised. Goals, visions and mission statements are invented and re-defined. Politicians urge us to join the enterprise culture, become more business-like, embrace change. But in reality, this dynamic of permanent change simply reproduces the status quo. Nothing actually, meaningfully, changes. We are living in a social recession. There is no politics to give voice to our protest. There is no alternative which offers a better future

6. Mind, *Stress and the Workplace*, 2005, www.mind.org.uk.
7. Institute of Alcohol Studies, Fact Sheet, *Alcohol and Health*, 2005, p8, www.ias.org.uk.

that is more equal, more just, more tolerant, and more kind.

Living well

The future of the democratic left depends on our being able to offer this alternative. How are we to live? The idea of 'living well' originates with Aristotle. Happiness is not defined by a transient moment, but is the good that we pursue 'in a complete life'. For the Stoic philosopher Seneca (circa.4BC-AD65), living was an art: 'But learning how to live takes a whole life, and, which may surprise you more, it takes a whole life to learn how to die'.[8] For Michel De Montaigne, writing in the sixteenth century, the act of self creation was integral to his humanity and his relationship with others; a process of coming to know himself which embraced uncertainty as the primary fact of being alive. The chief aim in life is pleasure: 'Even in virtue our ultimate aim … is pleasure'.[9] Virtue is not to be found in an external law or deity. It grows out of the pleasure we discover in being with ourselves, and with those we love and befriend. Ethics is the endeavour to go on being.

Who speaks in public of such things today? The left once cultivated this language, but it is now bereft of a vision of a better life. The concern with living well is not simply a valorisation of private individualism, but indicative of the difficulty individuals have at certain historical moments in finding meaning and purpose in life. There is a need for a politics of social transformation which takes seriously the importance of living well. We can find precursors in the traditions of ethical socialism, anarchism, the New Life, Quakerism, but these tended to reproduce an idea of the good life that was singular and too prescriptive for our plural society. John Stuart Mill provides a good example of the liberal attempt to avoid this dilemma. In *On Liberty*, he asserts that the cultivation of individuality is central to well being. Society must preserve the freedom 'of pursuing our own good in our way'. The ultimate appeal of all ethics cannot be to an absolute morality. It must be to utility, to structure the conditions which optimise individual well being. But today the principle of utility has been discredited by the market based reforms and audit cultures in health and education. The market disables individual agency, destroys the ethic of care and service, and depoliticises the

8. Seneca, *Dialogues and Letters*, Penguin 1997, p66.
9. Michel De Montaigne, *The Essays: A Selection*, Penguin 1993, p18.

relationship of the individual to society. We need a new story about individual freedom and self-fulfilment that is about human interdependency and the ethic of reciprocity, not the calculative logic of the market and utility.

Stories of renewal are not conjured out of thin air; they are made on the basis of what we learn from the traditions we inherit. There are three principles we have inherited which have defined the politics of modernity: liberty, equality and fraternity. The Right laid claim to liberty, the Left made claim to equality. Each was embedded in its class and polarised as mutually exclusive to the other. Fraternity never achieved the same ideological significance as the other two principles. It was the virtue of the political activist, and the ethos of the society promised by a utopian future. But it is the tradition of fraternity which has the potential to give shape to a new narrative of individual freedom. Fraternity, in its recognition of human interdependence, is the catalyst which brings together liberty and equality. In its advocacy of the social and relational nature of human beings, the self-fulfilment of each is indivisible from the equal worth of all. We need a new ideal of fraternity - a commonwealth of difference upheld by mutual recognition.

The philosopher Paul Ricoeur (who died in May 2005) offers a way of thinking about interdependence and its relationship to the ethic of living well. In his book *Oneself as Another*, he defines an 'ethical intention' that must be central to a democratic left politics. It is: 'the desire to live well with and for others in just institutions'.[10] He examines each of the three points of this definition. The first point is 'to live well', which he describes as 'the nebulous of ideals and dreams of achievements with regard to which a life is held to be more or less fulfilled or unfulfilled' (p179). Ricoeur's second point is 'with and for others'. He describes living with and for others as 'solicitude'. Solicitude is not separate from individual self esteem; it expresses its social nature. Ricoeur explains this by using the example of friendship in which 'each loves the other as being the man he is' (p183). To be 'equal among friends' is for two friends to render to the other 'a portion equal to what he or she receives' (p184). What follows on from the giving and receiving of friendship is the idea of equality. Friendship involves the ethic of reciprocity and this sets friendship on the path to justice: 'where life together shared by a few people gives way to the distribution of shares in a plurality on

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10. Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey, University of Chicago Press, 1994, p180 (see also p172).

the scale of a historical, political community' (p188). Ricoeur is describing ethical life as originating in the sphere of interpersonal relationships and extending upward into the wider social realm and into the political community.

The aim of living necessitates an interdependency with others. The corollary of this interdependency is equality. Consequently, Ricoeur argues, the aim of living encompasses a sense of justice. This brings his inquiry to the third point of the 'ethical intention': 'just institutions'. Justice finds its expression in the idea of 'just institutions'. By institution Ricoeur means, 'the structure of living together as this belongs to a historical community'. The structure is irreducible to interpersonal relations and yet it is 'bound up with them in a remarkable sense' (p194). This is because institutions require political communities whose function is distributive. The distributive operations of a political community are more than the sharing implied by solicitude. Distribution involves the apportioning of 'roles, tasks, advantages and disadvantages between the members of a society' (p200). Where there is sharing there may be too much or not enough - 'the unjust man is the one who takes too much in terms of advantages or not enough in terms of burdens' (p201). Equality is the ethical core of justice. And it is not exclusive to the discourses of the political community. There is no wall between the individual and society which prevents the transition of the ethical aim from interpersonal life to the social and political realm. Equality for Ricoeur 'is to life in institutions what solicitude is to interpersonal relations' (p202). Justice holds persons to be irreplaceable and so adds to solicitude, 'to the extent that the field of application of equality is all of humanity' (p202). In an interview Ricoeur summarises his notion of ethical life as: 'the wish for personal accomplishment with and for others, through the virtue of friendship and, in relation to a third party, through the virtue of justice'.[11]

From its old incarnation as a limited and gender biased expression of solidarity, fraternity offers an ethical basis for a politics which takes seriously the idea of living well. It provides the first step in the ideological break with neo-liberalism, culturally, politically and economically. Ricoeur writes: 'This wishing to live together is silent, generally unnoticed, buried; one does not remark its existence until it falls apart' (*Critique*, p99). Putting the pieces back together is the beginning of the story.

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11. Paul Ricoeur, *Critique and Conviction*, Polity Press, London, 1998, p60.