EDITORIAL

Opportunity knocks

We live in a tantalising world of beckoning opportunities. If we can only work on and invest in our own capabilities, and seize the moment when it comes, we can be part of the world of success. One problem for most of us, however, is that the idea of opportunity is closely linked to the concept of the competitive individual battling to secure a place in the future - where for many there will be more knocks than opportunities. In this issue of *Soundings* we look at different approaches to the future, and at what our concept of the future tells us about the nature of the present.

One critical part of the future is our children. The way we bring them up is an indication of how we feel about the future; and of course our attitudes to the young and ideas on how they should be educated reveal much about the present. So in this issue there are a number of articles about current attitudes to children, education and childcare.

Lawrence Grossberg argues that children are caught up in the crossfire of a battle between competing visions of the future. He sees an epochal cultural clash between those who no longer believe that progress is possible, because the future is unpredictable and we cannot influence it, and those who believe that what we do in the present can change the future for the better. As he argues, a belief in the unpredictability of the world provides massive sustenance for the right, since it undermines all arguments in favour of intervention, while at the same time encouraging a retreat to conservatism in the face of a risky outside world. In contrast, the left needs to see a way of getting from where we are now to a different future. Without such an understanding we are likely to feel depressed and powerless. Grossberg came to these conclusions in trying to think about why children in the United States are currently having such a bad time. He argues that a culture which has no sense of direction is likely to be in trouble when it comes to looking after and educating its children.

If we look at our attitudes to children in Britain, we can see something similar going on. Without a strong sense of how we want the future to be, the government tends to revert to a default position, thinking mainly about how children will fit into the economy - which is regarded as something we adapt

to rather than intervene in. (Though it does, of course, spend quite a bit of time thinking about how to make us all behave ourselves.)

Sue Gerhardt's article shows the contradictions between New Labour's projection of itself as emotionally literate, and as understanding the needs of changing family patterns, and its actual policies towards the very young. As she argues, most policies are led by workforce considerations, and since babies don't contribute to the economy, their needs tend to be low on the priority list. She points out that, since the government's 'entire trajectory is one of pushing independence and responsibility onto the wayward members of the national "family"', it is difficult for them to accommodate a need for dependence. An absence of any vision beyond adapting to the unpredictable vagaries of the economy means that the best we can all do is strive to make ourselves and our children fit in with its changing demands.

Lisa Harker makes similar points in her review of government policies on childcare, though she argues that there is a detectable shift taking place towards greater recognition of the needs of children, as opposed to those of the labour market. However she acknowledges that the battle for recognition of children's needs is a tough one.

Lynda Dyson and I had an interesting time talking to three teenage girls studying at a North London comprehensive school. We wanted to find out what their thoughts were on the opportunities the future holds. An extract from this conversation is included in this issue, and we also wrote a short article to go with it, partly prompted by the discussion. Our main argument is that young people experience massive pressure in the highly competitive and market-orientated environment in which they grow up. They have to continually work on themselves to produce themselves as achieving individuals able to compete for jobs and success. In this sense they are truly Blair's children, with all the contradictions that that implies.

Rowan Williams offers a welcome alternative approach to childhood. He argues that we need to think about what kind of adults we are and wish our children to become; reflecting on this will give better guidance on how to bring up our children. As he argues, rhetoric about responsibility and community would have more meaning coming from an adult society which was itself responsible and nurturing. His vision is one of humanity and hope based on Christian principles, which of course raises the question of how to sustain such

faith in the future on the secular left.

Other articles in this issue also deal with the future. Martin McIvor takes up the debate about the future of New Labour, highlighting the tensions between their dual strategy of embracing the market while proclaiming support for social democracy. Geoff Andrews offers an altogether more enticing prospect, in his advocacy of convivial politics and slow food. James Robertson puts forward some interesting proposals for changing the rules of the money system, while David Purdy argues that it is time for capitalism to call a halt to its reckless pursuit of growth, in the interests of future generations. Finally Jo Littler talks to Clive Bennett and Kate Soper about the radical potential of the politics of ethical consumption. We publish all these in the hope that they may offer some answers to the questions raised at the beginning by Lawrence Grossberg.

SD

Past and future *Soundings*

Soundings is now ten years old and last summer we marked the occasion with an event that attracted over fifty readers and contributors. It proved a success, and we're planning a second event for 2006. The date is Saturday 10 June at the Tavistock Centre, so put it in your diaries now. We'll email details in the New Year.

Our aim for the future is to play a strategic role in the revival of a democratic left. We have significant intellectual resources, a radical tradition of creative and open thinking, a wide network of contributors and, our biggest asset, a strong core of supporters. We look forward to another ten years in which all of these grow.

The next issue is of *Soundings* is on Naked Life and includes Sayeed Khan on the war on terror in Pakistan; Kurt Jacobsen comparing the wars in Vietnam and Iraq; and Faisal Devli on Jihadism. The issue also includes Ruth Lister on poverty, Doreen Massey on the world city and articles on Northern Ireland and the Caucasus.

JR

COMMENTARY

Securing our future

It seems as though any link between those born before 1966 and those born after 1992 (to pick two general election years) is ruptured. On either side of the divide, we are alien to each other. Tradition is severed. The old do not pass on their knowledge to the young, who need to know different things. The old ones imbibed the idea of being a citizen with their NHS orange juice, or, before that, learned it with the live tradition of fighting for the right to vote. There was no question about whether or not to enter the electoral register, and little about voting itself. Our lives were bounded by the country's borders and history. We lived in a world where public places were full of men in uniform - postmen (twice a day, regular as clockwork, they knew everyone), platform guards, bus conductors, commissionaires, soldiers on leave, etc, etc. Who needed bobbies on the beat in that sort of gently militarised society. To read a book, you went to the library ruled over by Very Strict People; to see a movie, you went to the cinema patrolled by an array of uniformed personnel. Adults then expected young people to be permanently on the edge of disorder, and organised their own and children's lives accordingly.

Young people could only communicate with each other face to face, on the street, in school. Letters would be scanned by parents (and the postman); only the privileged had a telephone - a large, heavy black instrument which might sit in a chilly hallway controlled by a parent. Even if a young person escaped parental monitoring, all phone communication was made via a real person, the authoritative operator. The telephone was rented from the General Post Office, a vast, monolithic and ubiquitous organisation, run by people in uniform. It issued all the permits one needed for a pleasant life - licences for dogs, cars, motorbikes, wirelesses. Adults then controlled all the money; they controlled communication; and most important, they controlled all knowledge. The monopoly of knowledge was tighter in middle-class homes, where children had less independence, less of a street life. Then, class, race, sex, boundaries were patrolled in large part by control over children's mobility and freedom.

Children feared people in authority. Not because they feared the adults' violence, but because adult authority was suffused with an almost numinous

sense of power. Our (children's) 'respect' was irrational; we accepted adult authority in the pre-1966 era in the same way that people once believed in God and accepted churchmen's authority. Adults relied on that. They did not have to go to parenting classes to learn the skills for setting boundaries and establishing their authority. They didn't need such skills in an era when their authority was ordained and they just swam along with it.

It is this super-natural form of adult authority which has gone in the post-1992 era. Without it, adults are lost. Those who relied on it most have not the social skills to govern the young and don't even try. Tony Blair's cry for 'Respect' carries no more resonance than a Pope exhorting us all to abstain from sex. Those cries are always laments for the end of the world as we have known it.

The collapse of comfort

The palpable fear in the post-1992 'global' world is that there are no boundaries of any sort, and that without the boundaries on which we previously depended for governance and enforcing 'respect' relationships - of the young for the old, of the lay for the uniformed, of black for white, of poor for rich - we will be adrift in anarchy.

In September 2005 the hearts of many, of all races and ages, were clutched by images of a United States helpless before a natural - if man-enhanced - disaster: the profound distinction between land and sea dissolves into a toxic soup, where there is neither the strong state nor the social skills to cope; in which power passes to young black men with guns and no morals. This was an *image*, not the reality, but it was the epitome of all ancient fears. Ah yes, this is what the world will be like, the revenge of the dispossessed, the return of the repressed, the dissolution of the boundaries made by geography, wealth, inherited authority, tradition. The Louisiana National Guard sheds its uniform rather than venture into this maelstrom.

The tsunami, with its hugely greater destruction of human life, could be incorporated into 'our' (the West's) normal life because it was how we expect the world to be: famine, catastrophe, piles of dead, for the poor, to whom we generously give a little money. Nothing in the natural order is shaken by third world catastrophes, including the natural order of our imaginings. Our sense of our natural superiority and safety and right to govern is untouched. Catastrophes belong in the third world. But extreme hurricanes in the Gulf of

Mexico burst over the border to shatter the West's complacent security. 9/11 is no longer a one-off disaster peculiar to New York, and so peculiar to its actual moment it can be known by its date. It was just the first breach.

The lives of the poor everywhere are precarious; for them safety lies in community - of family, religion or gang. But these are the very forms which the privileged - us - escape from, discard as outdated, or persecute as criminal irruptions. For the privileged, the nation-state and its monopoly of force remains our protection; but even the commanders of that force are saying that is no longer enough. Revenge and punishment can be wreaked by terrorists. There is a perceived threat to our privileged sense that every day can be counted on - that in our habitual peace and security we can plan our future, divide time into work and play, join groups which have a political or cultural purpose and have nothing to do with survival, and altogether live outside that apocalyptic hysteria which only a few right-wing survivalists in the West voluntarily conjure up to give form to their fears and hatreds.

One consequence of a future in which real catastrophes for the West might occur frequently is that we can only imagine a future if we accord to central states far more instruments of governance. And these instruments, which can no longer depend on a natural social hierarchy of respect and authority, are increasingly likely to depend on force. Interestingly, warnings of imminent catastrophe have now passed from Jehovah's witnesses to the elite. They spy WMD, terrorist attacks, rising sea levels, devastating bird flu, and so on, in every underground cellar or mobile home.

Why? Is this realism, or is it the old watchword of the militarised elite: Be Prepared? For them, the ideal citizenry is one in a permanent state of suspicious vigilance. But this suspicion is to be directed towards those who pass as fellow citizens, not towards their governors: a vigilant citizenry is a biddable citizenry. No wonder the young don't want to join in, when they themselves are the primary targets of suspicion.

Can new forms of communality be created which provide for a new sense of order, a new sense of belonging? Yes, they are being created every day. The question, of course, is the nature of the communities that people look to in order to feel a sense of belonging and common order, and the price that these will exact from those outside the community.

What we *don't* want in the future is communities which include 'protection'

- meaning a monopoly of violence - amongst their functions. A fatal flaw in American communal life is the subsidiarity of the duty to protect people in their times of weakness. This duty has devolved, with particular carelessness under Bush II, onto the gun-carrying head of the family, or alternatively to the armed gang. The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina highlighted the bizarre spectacle of a wealthy state which cannot run effective services of aid and protection, but accords to the gun trade the status of a sacrosanct protector and symbol of civilised life.

Protecting the citizenry

Any state which seeks to avoid the American way, and to retain the function of protection rather than by default devolving it to the level of the community, requires absolute punctiliousness in protecting equally all those coming under its command - though this doesn't mean in the same way. Those who are vulnerable for any reason to threat will always need more protection than those who aren't. Part of the sustained anger of black Britons about the British police stems from a refusal to meet their needs for protection: instead there has been a determination to see all black people as a criminal under-class. There is a real and present danger that a similar fate will befall Asian Muslims, not so much in the USA, to which an educated middle class emigrated, but in Europe where, in these times, they are a substantial part of the dispossessed. The most recent British Crime Survey shows that ethnic minority households are substantially more fearful of crime than are white people; and people of 'Mixed Race' (not defined) are the most likely to have been victims of violent crime, as well as of household burglary. (In addition, a higher proportion of Asians than other groups reported themselves as being the victims of crime, but as the Asian population includes a relatively higher proportion of young people, and young people are the most common victims of violence, this racial difference was attributed to age. Black people, distinguished from Mixed Race, were apparently slightly less likely to have been the victims of crime than any other group - which does not abnegate their sense of being unprotected when they are victims.)

The requirement of the state to provide equal protection for all is first and foremost a threat to the local protector (pater familias, gang-leader); but it is also a threat to individual civil liberties. All civil liberties are not absolute rights.

The question facing us now, for the future, is not whether or not some liberties should be suspended for the safety of all (this is something which always happens - for example, compulsory mass evacuation of an inundated city is quite obviously an infringement of people's liberty). Instead we should be thinking about what other protective safeguards should be introduced when a liberty is eroded, in order to prevent any erosion from gaining momentum and becoming a nonchalant exercise of despotism. We need to make fine distinctions. For instance, the removal of all rights to habeas corpus of the men seized and taken to Guantanamo Bay is clearly unconscionable; the curtailment of freedom of expression for those urging the impressionable to murder - whether these are BNP members or Islamic jihadists - is not.

Large imaginings of the future tend to be either utopian or apocalyptic, bedded unsafely on depressed lamentations for the imagined past. But there are plenty of people around that we can draw on as models for the present: people with skills for dealing with the here and now, with the courage to intervene, with the ability to negotiate and propose compromises, and with a willingness to stretch outside their own community. These are not the skills of the politician, who is fruitlessly urged to come up with big visions. These skills are those of all the people whose efforts to save a snail, or start up a local dialogue between and about religions, or to work daily with the young to establish creative relationships that do not rely on inherited authority, make human charity - in the best sense - incremental. These are the people who restore human relationships as the heart of civilisation, and who ensure that that civilisation is not, if a catastrophe hovers, skin deep.

SB