

Convivial cultures

In this issue we explore questions of how we can live together in a more convivial way. A common theme in many of the articles is the need to address the sense of disconnectedness and alienation that is brought about by living in society where the market invades every part of our lives, including our minds and bodies. Some contributors argue the need for a more humane and democratic politics and culture; others highlight aspects of contemporary life that contribute to inhumanity, or attempt to think through some of the contours of more convivial cultures.

Zygmunt Bauman argues that escape from the pressures of a risk-strewn and deregulated world has become the new meaning of utopia: it now means little more than a constant search to avoid being a loser, the practice of competitive consumption and the remodelling of the self - trying to find the small safe space within the inferno. He evokes a world where there seems little hope of thinking collectively about new ways to live.

In contrast to this world of individuals, Roshi Naidoo discusses the possibility of giving more recognition to our sameness. She argues that we need to think more about sameness, instead of being unremittingly focused on difference. In this she references Paul Gilroy's work on empire and the idea of the possibility of a new version of humanism. As she asks, what would it mean to recognise that the world's poor are just like us, or that Britain is not as special as it thought it was?

Alan Finlayson's contribution to a politics of re-engagement is to think about ways of improving our political rhetoric. He argues the need for a more

transformative approach to communication, a move away from holding steadfast to a set of ideas seen as possessions, and towards speaking with, not to, our fellow citizens. A more conversational democracy would clearly be an important part of a more convivial culture.

Pat Kane argues that we would all be a lot less miserable if we thought less about work and more about play. He suggests that work should be renamed valuable activity and play should be understood as creativity, fundamental to the art of life, and a constitutive part of our humanity. This would help us to see where much of the misery of work comes from and to think creatively about ways of making our lives more satisfying. Amir Saeed looks at one specific area of creativity - Islamic hip-hop - and traces fascinating lines of connection between music, identity, creativity and resistance. Jonathan Keane charts the more dysfunctional forms of cultural life but sees hope in the assertion of humanity against the market.

Simon Charlesworth, Paul Gilfillan and Richard Wilkinson discuss the adverse effects of inequality on people's sense of self and health, and this theme of the emotional aspects of living with injustice are taken up in David Wilson's account of the inhumanity of prisons, where he argues that finding ways for people to emotionally engage with prisoners as human beings is the key to campaigning for the abolition of prisons.

Richard Minns tells of the Mothers of May Square, a group who have built a movement full of life from the ashes of the bitter grief of the loss of their children. Richard Gott also brings good news from South America, in his account of the rise of the left there, and in particular the rise of indigenous groups who are now organising to challenge the continuing injustices of their colonial disappropriation.

Elsewhere in the issue, Christoph Bluth gives a very informative account of the geopolitics of Central Asia, Sue Himmelweit outlines the main features of feminist approaches to economics - and Andy Pearmain calls for the Labour Party to be humanely killed off.

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Wonderful life

Jonathan Rutherford

It's a wonderful life if you can find it.

Nick Cave

In Michael Collins's book *The Keepers of Truth* (Scribner 2001) Bill lives a life of uneventful, quiet desperation alone in a mansion on the edge of a decaying town in the mid West of the US. Close by is the zoo marooned in a post-industrial wasteland populated by the homeless and echoing with the strange noises of the animals in captivity. Bill's grandfather made a fortune manufacturing fridges - 'factories were our cathedrals' - but his family followed the town into penury and despair when production stopped. Bill works as a journalist on the local paper writing mundane stories that keep the gossip mill of small town life turning. But he is bewitched by a desire to speak the truth - the poverty, despair, suicides that plague the town - and truth erupts from him and into print, much to the chagrin of his boss Sam, and the consternation of the local citizens. 'I got this tunnel vision, felt suddenly buried under the debris of our dead industrialism. We were occupying one of the gaps in history that go undocumented, that long silent stupefaction before some other means of survival comes along to save civilization.' Bill must search for the truth outside the rule-bound semiotic system that constitutes the stupefaction. He must find it in the madness of unshared meanings.

Here we are in our own gap in history. Old states of life no longer feel tenable, but what is to come in the future? We live in an afterlife of the post-modern and post-industrial. There is little that is tangible to give us our bearings. Zygmunt Bauman characterises this life as liquid modernity. It is a society of increasingly individualised individuals, which cannot easily hold its shape - it neither fixes

nor binds time and space. Fluids flow and yield to the slightest pressure. They drip, flow, gush, swirl, disperse into particles, gather into a flood. When we try and grasp the meaning of society, understanding escapes us like water.¹

In this liquid modern world our anchor is the culture we can create and which we can share. But the paradox of liquid modernity is that its swirling effervescence suspends us in a state of disoriented inertia. Bauman argues that we are each instructed to create our own biographical exit from this 'socially concocted mess'. But it is an impossible task without recourse to the linguistic tools and cultural artefacts of our interdependency. We need others in order to make narratives which give meaning to our individual selves.

How shall we find the common shared meanings that connect us to others? If they no longer exist how shall we make them? This is not a new predicament. At the beginning of the twentieth century Georg Simmel described modernity as a culture of unrest. Individuals are alienated from one another, not through isolation, but because they have become anonymous in the public realm. Things without monetary value are ignored and marginalised. The meaning of life slips through our fingers. For Max Weber capitalist modernity is 'an iron cage' of 'specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart'. It is a nullity which 'imagines it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved'.

Rainer Marie Rilke struggles with this nullity in his sequence of poems *Duino Elegies* (1923). He searches for words which will express his feeling that something profound in his life is missing. He wants to grasp *life* and to express it in his art. He seeks the solitude that will allow him the inward contemplation of his imagination. But to communicate this inner world requires feeling, and his feelings are dependent upon his relationships with others. His need of others threatens his art, and yet his art means nothing without them. He cannot find the words to describe what it is he does want. He is caught in an ambivalence of need and desire. When Rilke looks at himself it is as an object through the eyes of another. He is a spectator of his life: 'Who, therefore, has turned us around, so that/ no matter what we do, we're in that attitude of someone leaving?'

Rilke's ambivalence resonates with the ambivalences of our own modern consumer society. In three decades the size of our economy has almost doubled. We are richer than ever before and yet economic growth has not provided

1. Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Polity 2005.

a collective sense of well being. It has brought with it greater opportunities and richness of experience for many, but also increasing levels of inequality, insecurity and unparalleled levels of debt. We are beset by social problems that are individualised and hidden away from public view - mental ill health, loneliness, growing numbers of psychologically damaged children, eating disorders, obesity, alcoholism, drug addiction. Here we are, free consumers, inundated with choice, 'singing in our chains'.

In his book *What Should the Left Propose?* (Verso 2005) Roberto Unger argues that the institutional and discursive structures that we build make us who we are. 'They however are finite, and we are not. There is always more in us, more capability of insight, of production, of emotion, of association, than there is in them'. We are, says Unger, 'context-transcending spirits'. There is something more to each of us that cannot easily be defined in language and representation, and there is also within us something that remains unfinished and open to the world. We can never be reduced entirely to sociological explanation. We know things that we cannot always think. The psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas calls them the 'unthought known'.

Michael Polanyi describes something similar in his idea of tacit knowledge - 'we know more than we can tell'. Government belief in knowledge-driven economic activity has been founded in the idea that tacit knowledge is the intangible of profitability and competitive advantage. Corporate capital has spent several decades finessing knowledge management in an attempt to capture it from its employees. University governance has striven to turn learning and thinking into measurable proxies in order to calculate staff productivity and institutional performance. And, like tacit knowledge, cultural meaning has also been expropriated and utilised for commodity production. Creativity and its raw materials of sounds, words, symbols, images and ideas are disentangled from their social ties in order for them to be commodified and their price calculated. But what capital achieves in its utilisation of knowledge and cultural meaning is the destruction of the very things it covets.

In contrast to this market-based instrumental approach to creativity, Ivan Illich proposes an alternative in the idea of conviviality.² People need creative forms of labour and the freedom to make things among which they can live. As

2. Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality*, Marion Boyars 2001, p11.

consumers we have access to many services and goods, but we do not have a say in how they are made or the ways in which they are put to use. In other words we are deprived of conviviality. Conviviality is an ethical value, and if it is reduced below a certain level in a society, no amount of industrial productivity and consumption can effectively satisfy the needs it creates. Illich argues that society needs to rediscover our interdependency and with it what he calls 'liberating austerity'. This is not a 'hair shirt' kind of austerity which denies pleasure, but a virtue which excludes only those enjoyments that are destructive of personal relatedness.

Paul Tillich suggests something similar when he describes an 'ethic of joy' that enhances playfulness. He contrasts the idea of joy with the kinds of pleasure we call fun. These, he argues, can be about an escape from emptiness, by which he means a lack of relatedness to things and persons and meanings; even to one's own self. This kind of fun is not the creative kind connected with play. It is ephemeral and distracting, the type of fun which can easily be commercialised, for it is dependent on calculable reactions, without passion, without risk, without love.³

There is a certain judgementalism in the moral tone of Tillich and Illich, but they offer suggestive alternatives to the commercially driven fun of consumer culture. We need to create something meaningful that might bridge Bill's gap in history: a transformative politics of the common good, and an imaginative collective projection of ourselves into a hopeful future. We might begin by attending to the madness of unshared meanings - the disorderly profusion of signs that have not been dragooned into the rule-bound semiotic system, as Wendy Wheeler describes it.⁴ This is the world of the imagination - unquantifiable and beyond measurement. It has been expunged from official forms of knowledge, and the logic of capital is unable to assimilate it. Imagination emerges out of the unthought known, and offers us the resources of hope.

3. Paul Tillich, *The New Being*, Charles Scribner's Sons 1955.

4. Wendy Wheeler, *The Whole Creature: Complexity, Biosemiotics and the Evolution of Culture*, Lawrence & Wishart 2006.