

Left futures

This issue of *Soundings* marks the beginnings of a long-term project to initiate a debate on future trajectories for the left. (The project will include the third annual *Soundings* event, which will take place on 30 June, see ad on page 7). The context for the ‘left futures’ project is a recognition that the conditions that gave rise to the left as we have traditionally known it have largely vanished: western society today is individualised and consumer-oriented, the era of mass production is over, the case for the market appears overwhelming - these social and cultural arguments are well rehearsed. Many draw the conclusion from this that it is no longer possible to make a case for socialism; others (less in number) ignore the changes and carry on regardless.

We are interested in exploring whether there can be new kinds of socialism more adapted to the emerging global modernities of the twenty-first century. What might be the basis for a socialist politics today? We could certainly start from the premise that capitalism in general and neoliberalism in particular, while globally hegemonic, could hardly be described as successful forms of social organisation. But in thinking about alternative forms we need to acknowledge that socialism in both its social democratic and communist varieties has had many problems, the most serious being its inability to find an acceptable balance between the rights, needs and desires of the group and those of the individual (for more on this see Jeremy Gilbert’s article in this issue).

As Zygmunt Bauman argues, also in this issue, there will always be a need for socialism as long as societies are unequal and precarious – i.e. the foreseeable future. His definition of socialism is that it rests on two principles:

The first assumption is that it is the duty of the community to insure its individual members against individual misfortune. And the second is that, just as the carrying capacity of a bridge is measured by the strength of its

weakest support, so the quality of a society should be measured by the quality of life of its weakest members.

As he also argues, these principles mean that capitalist societies will always be subject to challenge from socialists, in some shape or form.

Michael Rustin's piece explores some of the ideas of Raymond Williams, and ways in which his insights into the interconnections between culture and politics remain important to left debate. In looking at some of the obstacles to the 'long revolution', however, he also notes the nature of the British state and its longstanding links to finance and empire. As he argues, the 'democratisation' agenda is a crucial part of any battle for economic justice.

No-one could argue that capitalism has much to offer on the question of sustainability. As Kate Soper points out in her article, business has a vested interest in constantly creating consumer desire for ever more commodities. One strand of new approaches to socialism is therefore likely to be a questioning of the pleasures on offer from commodity consumerism, and an exploration of other forms of hedonism. David Purdy has already put forward, in *Soundings* 31, a compelling argument for a 'steady-state' (i.e. no growth) economy, and in this issue he shows how Citizen's Income could both help to solve some of the economic and distributive problems inherent in a steady-state economy, and be part of a wider project to change popular views on the nature of work and pleasure. Also on the theme of sustainability, James Marriott's essay presents an unusual way of looking at the connections between business (in this case the oil business) and damage to the environment and to people. He demonstrates the intricate patterns of connections sustained by companies such as Shell and BP, patterns in which all of us are implicated. Patrick Curry's argument that ecological concerns should be at the heart of left politics is also compelling, and points to some of the social and cultural transformations that are needed if the left is again to become a vital force.

Elsewhere in the issue, Michael Kenny discusses the Compass programme for renewal; Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim outlines the ways in which individualisation and globalisation are affecting people's personal lives; Priscilla Alderson, in her discussion of childhood and the economy, shows how government intervenes to shape such processes in particular ways; Jacky Law and Anna Coote, from

very different perspectives, discuss the future of health politics; and Stewart Lansley documents the widening gap between the rich and the rest. Each of these articles raises further key questions about how we might define a new left politics.

SD

New kinds of socialism for new global modernities

THE THIRD SOUNDINGS ANNUAL EVENT

***Saturday 30 June 10.30am to 5pm
Tavistock Centre, 120 Belsize Lane, London NW3***

The socialism that developed in response to the modernity of Western mass industrial society has largely passed into history. New global modernities are emerging, and we need to create new kinds of socialism, able to effectively counter the destructive impact of capitalism.

Part of the *Soundings* 'left futures' project, this one-day event will look at the impact of financialisation, the role of the state, and how we might recreate social life in an age of insecurity. From May the *Soundings* website (www.soundings.org.uk) will be hosting analysis and debate on left futures, with the opportunity for comment and discussion.

'New kinds of socialism for new global modernities' is organised in association with Compass (www.compassonline.org.uk) and Red Pepper (www.redpepper.org.uk) and financially supported by the Barry Amiel and Norman Melburn Trust.

Registration costs £25, unwaged is £10 (includes lunch). To reserve a place, send credit card details or a cheque payable to Soundings to FREEPOST, LON 15823, London, E9 5BR (no stamp is needed). Alternatively, you can book online by going to www.soundings.org.uk. Places are limited so early booking is advisable. For further information contact sally@lwbooks.co.uk.