

# Politics and markets

The market is constantly encroaching on our lives, and it increasingly pervades our politics too. The contributors to *Soundings* 36 explore this issue in a number of different ways.

Ken Livingstone is one of the most interesting and creative politicians in Britain today. In his discussion with Doreen Massey he acknowledges the many ways in which business interests constrain his choices, but he argues that you can always find spaces within which you can make a difference. For example he has worked with business on a number of environmental initiatives. This kind of principled pragmatism raises the question of where you draw the line. Is promoting the flourishing of the City and its institutions an acceptable price to pay for keeping your place at the table of the powerful? Is the market so strong that we have to look to business for some of our partnerships for change?

While Ken Livingstone is guided by robust pragmatism, Erik Olin Wright puts forward an equally robust theoretical guide to transformative politics. His clarity about goals and practices is informed by a recognition of the conflict of interests that exists between any egalitarian project and commercial priorities. Thus, against the tendency within Labour circles to believe that there can be a politics without winners and losers, he clearly recognises that, for example, profit maximisation is incompatible with the kind of regulation that promotes the common good. This enables him to demarcate a politics that combines radical egalitarian democratic values with an institutional realism that avoids any blurring of the boundaries between markets and politics.

Jonathan Rutherford explores the many intellectual and institutional links between business and politics in his research on the web of connections

between insurance companies, the academy and new government policies on welfare reform. He shows how US company UnumProvident's intellectual window-dressing for refusing sickness claims was welcomed into the government's own claims adjustment project. The psychology institute set up by the company employs former government personnel on its staff. The institute then produces monographs that - delivering a service for both the insurance business and the government - show that incapacity for work can be seen as a cultural phenomenon that can be addressed by a learning programme for the claimant. This is a classic neoliberal move - and Michael Rustin in his article shows how Richard Layard performs the same manoeuvre in suggesting cut-price individual therapy for depression, while simultaneously recognising that trends in society more widely are generators of mental illness. Sociological theories that are outdated and/or comply with the neo-liberal order are deployed to simplify the complex interrelationships between individual and society, allowing responsibility for social problems to be redefined as a problem for individuals.

Janet Newman and Nick Mahony, in their detailed response to the Compass publication *Democracy and the Public Realm*, look at a number of ways in which the language of democracy and participation is merging with the vocabulary of consumer choice. They also analyse the government's focus on civil society as an empty and apolitical space in which they can trawl for social entrepreneurs. They argue that civil society is becoming aligned with the market in new forms of hybrid organisations charged with service delivery and community renewal. In this way more public space is colonised.

**M**ichael Rustin revisits the happiness debate, and argues that it is the prioritisation of economic growth over other values that is making people unhappy amidst their increasing affluence. Market values reduce people's happiness, as does the fear engendered by competition in our 'risk' society. New Labour's drive to remodel us all to fit the market and learn to compete increases our sense of insecurity. A reassertion of the social against the encroachment of the market is the best hope for greater well-being, and Mike is critical of the government's relentless requirement for individuals to take responsibility for increasing their performativity.

Richard Jones offers a user-friendly guide to nanotechnology in an article which explains its scientific underpinning but also explores its social context.

As he argues: 'If such a thing exists (or indeed ever existed) as an "independent republic of science", disinterestedly pursuing knowledge for its own sake, nanotechnology is not part of it.' Nanotechnology is fully integrated into the market for intellectual commodities, drawing universities into this market in their search for funds. It is at the heart of a shift towards goal-oriented science, where the focus is on products rather than exploration.

**V**alerie Bryson looks at the way time is colonised by neoliberalism. As she argues, as well as the long hours culture that afflicts many professional workers, and the many hours worked by the low-waged in order to earn enough to live on, the high levels of participation by women in the workforce are a main reason that people feel so short of time. There has been a shift of work from the household to the market economy, and this has meant non-market time has been taken away from us all. Increasingly, time means money and this is unhealthy for us all.

Faisal Devji discusses ways in which even the military in the USA, largely because of the contradictions involved in waging war on 'terror', are becoming culturally and institutionally fragmented. As he argues, this is signalled not only by infiltration into the military domain by private contractors and the CIA, but also by the spread of private or civilian practices among its own troops. Faisal quotes Donald Rumsfeld arguing for the US armed forces and Defence Department to promote 'a more entrepreneurial approach', to behave 'less like bureaucrats and more like venture capitalists'.

In the rest of the issue Nira Yuval-Davis argues that there is a need to be aware of different processes of racialisation in different historically specific situations. This applies particularly to Israel, which should be understood as a settler society, with all the implications that has for political resistance to Zionism. Iranian intellectual Ramin Jahanbegloo discusses the Iranian take on the liberal tradition with Danny Postel, in an interview which brings out some of the complexities of democratic universalism. And finally Cynthia Cockburn, in words and photographs, explores our discomfort and anxiety about death and the lifeless body.

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Soundings will develop the theme of politics and markets with a series of seminars on 'Cultures of Capitalism' that will begin in the autumn at Marx House in

Clerkenwell, London. The series is part of the left futures project. Readers can access the recent online debate at [www.soundings.org.uk](http://www.soundings.org.uk). The seminars will ask critical and strategic questions about contemporary changes in capitalism and modernity. What philosophical and theoretical resources do we need to create a counter-hegemonic politics to liberal market capitalism and its ideology of neo-liberalism? For further details see below and facing page.

# Soundings

## 'CULTURES OF CAPITALISM'

### SEMINARS

**Marx House, 37a Clerkenwell Green, London EC1**

The seminars will ask critical and strategic questions about contemporary changes in capitalism and modernity. The political defeat of the left has resulted in the dispersal of its language of social justice, freedom and equality. What philosophical, cultural and theoretical resources do we need to create new understandings of political and social transformation?

**23 November 11am to 4.00pm**  
**Cultures of capitalism**

The new cultures of capitalism are colonising increasing areas of public life and the 'lifeworld'. In resisting this occupation, what is the role of symbolic meaning in making alternative cultures and politics?

■ *Stuart Hall, Jonathan Rutherford, Gilane Tawadros*

**14 December 11am to 4.00pm**  
**Re-imagining individual life**

'Liquid modernity' and a consumer culture of distractions and the pursuit of wishes is reshaping individual life. How might the left respond with its own ethical values, forms of pleasure and ways of life?

- Zygmunt Bauman (other speakers to be announced)

**18 January 2008 11am to 4.00pm**  
**Understanding society and remaking politics**

The new cultures of capitalism are transforming society and social relations. What sociological ideas do we need to understand the changes and develop a new politics of the left?

- Beatrix Campbell, Michael Rustin, Richard Sennett

**22 February 2008 11am to 4.00pm**  
**The financialisation of capitalism**

Financialisation has become a dynamo of corporate profitability while being a source of grotesque inequalities and potential economic instability. What kind of political strategies might counter its impact on society and on local and global economies?

- Doreen Massey (other speakers to be announced)

*Registration for each seminar costs £15, or £40 for a block booking of the whole series of four. It is advisable to book in advance as places are limited. Send cheque payable to Soundings, and details of the seminars you wish to attend, to FREEPOST, LON 176, London, E9 5BR (no stamp is needed).*

*Tickets available online from 10 September at [www.soundings.org.uk](http://www.soundings.org.uk).*

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