Editorial

The demarcation of different eras helps us to think about politics historically, but the periodisations we make, particularly within recent history, are always provisional. It took a while to recognise that we were living through the period of neoliberalism - at first, following Stuart Hall, we named it as Thatcherism, with Reaganism added soon afterwards, until the realisation gradually dawned that we were witnessing a global phenomenon, as international capital sought to reverse the gains of the postwar period across the world.[1] Now, like many others, we are wondering whether (hoping that) the neoliberal era is coming to an end.

As the editors noted in their introduction to *After Neoliberalism: The Kilburn Manifesto*, the financial crisis of 2007-8 could have been the moment when the economic failures of neoliberalism led to its political rejection. Instead, the right succeeded in portraying the causes of the crisis as fiscal irresponsibility, and the cure therefore as austerity: the crisis was mobilised as an argument for the intensification of the ongoing processes of redistribution from poor to rich. This absence of a political break is what prompted the *Manifesto*: it was an attempt to unpick the operations of neoliberalism, and to argue that it was time to organise for a new moral and economic settlement.

The question that is now emerging, in the light of reversals being suffered by neoliberal regimes across Europe and North America - including those being currently inflicted on the May government - is whether the post-crisis austerity strategy was the last gasp of the old era: is there anything left in the neoliberal repertoire that can keep the show on the road? Michael Rustin explores this question in the opening article in this issue, and argues that one important way to ensure that the beast is put into its coffin and kept there is to put every effort into promoting a clear alternative to its deathly world view. Labour's achievements in the 2017 election were linked very closely to people's sense that the manifesto was putting forward a different and coherent solution to the crisis: this was one of the main reasons for the change in Labour's fortunes. We now need to ask, as Mike points out, what else we need to do: 'what has to happen for this partial breach in the walls of the fortress to become more substantial?'.

As Stuart Hall pointed out in 'The neoliberal revolution' (see note 1), we have

seen a number of different phases of neoliberalism in Britain since Thatcherism. Tony Blair opted to reconstruct social democracy as 'the best shell' for a New Labour variant. The Cameron Tories abandoned the social-democratic element but kept the social liberalism. May is now seeking to hold together another contradictory alliance. But, as Mike argues in his article, her empty mantra - 'stable government' - is probably all she can think of to say at the moment, given the virtual impossibility of holding together the elements that would make up a majority right-wing alliance. Let us hope that the current uneasy alliance reveals itself to be unsustainable.

The different approaches to neoliberalism in the different phases we have lived through show the adaptability, capacity and abundant resources of its organisers and organic intellectuals. But they also show that work has constantly to be done to renew a hegemonic project: there are always instabilities in any settlement, and the dominance of the currently prevailing ruling group is not inevitable. What's more, the demise of any hegemonic project is much more likely if there is an effective counter-hegemonic project. This is a fundamental argument that we have been making in this journal for a very long time. Are we beginning to see the light?

The developing left in and around the Labour Party (including us) still has some work to do in developing its counter-hegemonic narratives. The contributors to our election discussion look at some of the areas where we could do more work. Kirsten Forkert discusses how to shift common sense about the public mood, and change our understanding of which voices are most important; and Ash Ghadiali looks at some of the new voices making themselves heard through a shift in media power. Rebecca Bramall explores how ideas at one time dismissed as utopian can make their way onto the political agenda, in this case ideas for a progressive taxation policy. Joe Painter debunks common sense about debt and argues for new approaches to political economy. Ewan Gibbs and John Barry look at post-election politics in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

As many commentators have noted, there is also a risk that neoliberalism may be succeeded by something worse. A number of contributors in this issue reflect on right-wing populism as represented by Trump. Alison Hearn looks at Trump's relationship to branding and self promotion; Annie Kelly analyses the ways in which mainstream conservatism in the US has created an atmosphere in which the alt-right can flourish: in particular, both constituencies share a yearning for the return to an imagined happy world ruled by white men. Akwugo Emejulu shows how populism

could be subverted and challenged by a global feminist populism. Joe Guinan discusses the bankruptcy of Trump's rhetoric on restoring manufacturing jobs to the US economy, and puts forward an alternative strategy. Francisco Dominguez outlines the dangerous element of chaos and disorder that Trump has added into the already lethal US policy towards its Latin American 'backyard'.

The last two articles, in very different ways, explore the intersections of identity and class in contemporary politics. Phil Cohen discusses the always-entangled-in-identity politics of class, and argues that we need to find new ideas for articulating working-class concerns to a progressive project, through 'building coalitions of shared concern around translocal issues'. Ben Little and Alison Winch, in the first instalment of our critical terms series, look at ways in which the idea of generation is deployed in mainstream discourse, often as a way of displacing class and other sources of inequality from consideration. They also look at the ways in which generation is connected to the specific different era in which it emerges - the Babyboomers, the Millennials, Generation X. While cautioning against too great an emphasis on generation as a causal factor, they also welcome the role of generation in galvanising support for Corbyn in the election. Perhaps today's youthful activists will flourish as they become the first post-neoliberal generation.

Robin Murray

The *Soundings* editorial team were keenly aware that some of our most cherished colleagues and friends were no longer with us for the post-election celebrations. Our most recent deeply felt loss was of Robin Murray, who died at the end of May. He and his wife Frances were supporting subscribers to *Soundings* when it first began in 1995, and have been long-term and staunch friends of the journal. Robin was an outstanding theoretical and practical innovator and a warm and engaging colleague. We will publish an obituary in the next issue.

Notes

1. Stuart Hall outlined the development of neoliberalism in 'The neoliberal revolution', in *Soundings* 48, 2011: www.lwbooks.co.uk/soundings/48/neoliberal-revolution.