

Dangerous times?

We are being urged, it seems, to imagine ourselves as living in a world and in an age of monsters. For George W. Bush they are everywhere: in Iraq, in an axis of evil, in the 'terrorists' lurking under every bed, in al-Qaida (and what makes this last one worse is that it is everywhere, yet seemingly hard to find). Peter Kilfoyle, writing in the *Guardian* (23.9.02, p17), talks aptly of Washington's 'factories of paranoia' – one of these is the PNAC (the Project for a New American Century), whose guiding principle is to challenge regimes 'hostile to our interests and values'. This is the same structuring of opposition as can be found in the conflict in Palestine.

Good and evil; and the consequent need to exterminate or expel. It calls to mind those processes of othering-for-purposes-of-elimination (apparently shocking to 'the international community' at the time) which in Serbia came to be called ethnic cleansing.

These are modes of differentiation which can only be posed in moralistic terms; and, as numerous writers in *Soundings* have stressed, this leads in turn to an evacuation of politics, of debate, and therefore of democratic participation. To define one's opponent in such terms is to refuse to recognise the place from where they are coming, the relations which structure the situation, and the ways in which one might be part of their production. Not only do we not look seriously at 'them'; neither do we seriously consider the nature of ourselves. The simple binaries of with-us-or-against-us (because we are who we are) must be reworked. And as the USA becomes ever more entrenched, the urgency of 'Europe' taking an identifiably distinctive stance – and not just on Iraq but also on the promotion of unalloyed neoliberalism – becomes ever more urgent. Maybe, indeed, the extremism of Bush and his advisers will do more to forge a European identity than have years of memo writing in Brussels. (It is also possible that Britain under Blair will do all it can to prevent such an outcome.)

It is appropriate, then, that this issue of *Soundings* addresses the question of 'monsters'. The theme of this issue, 'Monsters and Morals', explores one way of

interpreting the production of these figures, through construction of ‘the other’. It points, too, to the operation of such structures in so many, less planetary, milder and more quotidian, parts of our lives. It is not just within George W’s imagining of the world that the language of monsters is spoken: it can be found within the housing estate, as a means of identifying oneself as part of a more desirable in-group; and in our daily press it helps to fuel the every-day demonisation of asylum-seekers and other migrants. One contributor explores the intricate links between the public operation of ‘race’ – one of the most powerful current means of categorising the other – and its effects on people’s personal and emotional lives. Today’s rhetorics of terror and evil, then, draw on modes of differentiation which are very deeply embedded.

Other contributors in this section draw attention to the crucial importance of the question of the place from which we stand and look at the world, in reflecting on different memories of 11 September in Chile and the USA. There is also discussion of the ethical and philosophical resources which might help us to respond to a dangerous world.

The feature articles also make reference to monsters, sometimes old ones, as when from Serbia Richard Minns asks ‘what now?’, after ‘humanitarian bombing’. (A question which echoes too around the blasted mountains of Afghanistan.) From Palestine, Tom Kay’s diaries vividly describe the violence of Israel’s attempt to annihilate the ‘enemy within’.

We also offer a feature on the legacy of the WEA’s *Highway* in the 1930s. Our opening article, in contrast, was prompted by the publication of Charlie Leadbeater’s recent book *Up the Down Escalator*, and analyses the economic and technological determinism of so many New Labour thinkers. This technocratic/administrative approach to politics stifles conflict almost as effectively as Bush’s moral crusade in the US: neither approach leaves much room for adversarial politics. Our aim is that *Soundings* will continue to maintain a modest critical space for a different political trajectory.

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