

# Editorial

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## Tales of the city

The majority of the world's population now live in cities, and in this issue a number of contributors discuss what this means for contemporary politics. Ash Amin asks what is salvageable from the old idea of the city as the ideal republic, the site of a potential utopian future. As he argues, for most of their inhabitants modern cities are not places of community and well-being: they are experienced as polluting, stressful and alienating. And yet urban life demands a 'being-togetherness', and it is here that the project of living with difference must be undertaken; an urban politics may yet emerge from the daily practices of care, solidarity and democracy that are part of the fabric of city life.

Gerry Hassan discusses the innovative Glasgow 2020 project, in which local citizens participated in a project to reimagine the city through stories. He contrasts the bland identikit versions of the city promulgated by those in charge of 'the official future' - where culture, creativity and diversity are appropriated as instruments of economic policy - to the way the participants in the project talked about the city - starting from how they felt about the meaning and purpose of their lives, and the values they would like their city to represent.

Rupa Huq discusses those vast swathes of our cities that are somehow seen as not part of them - the suburbs. As she argues, the settled white suburb of popular myth no longer exists. The *Daily Mail's* shock in July 2005 at 'Suicide Bombers From Suburbia' marked a moment of public recognition - for better or worse - that something was changing in the outer-city. Our imaginings of the inner and outer city are marked by the oppositions that are set up between them - black/white, dangerous safe/, exciting/boring, and so on. The reality is much more complex; and it is important to recognise that the vision of suburban Middle England that is lodged in the heart of New Labour is largely imaginary.

David Morley's essay reflects on the different ways that Istanbul is represented and experienced. The city's location at the intersection of West and East, its history of empire and contested identities, and the co-existence within its spaces of prestige international cultural projects and squatter settlements, make it a place that holds up to us a picture of one possible future for modern cities. Thus attempting to get to grips with the contradictions of Istanbul may help to transform our wider thinking about global cities.

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A second cluster of articles looks at the geopolitical context within which such cities exist. Branko Milanovic gives a concise account of the different ways that global inequality is measured - showing how people's choice of what to measure determines the conclusions they reach, and along the way demonstrating yet again the failure of neoliberal economic policies to deliver any improvement at all in the lives of those living in the poorest parts of the world. He shows that global location is the major determinant of a person's life chances, and argues for some kind of global redistribution via taxation to help to mitigate some of the world's worst inequalities.

Philip Golub and Chalmers Johnson each reflect on American empire - in a way that perhaps suggests that Milanovic's proposals for some kind of global social democratic redistribution, however modest, are unlikely to find much support among the powerful interest groups that dominate the global economy. Golub dismantles the myth that the USA pursues its goals largely through informal means, and without resort to force. As he shows, the US relationship to Europe in the postwar period seemed to argue for its nature as a beneficial hegemon, but outside Europe force has been the usual means of securing US dominion. Johnson examines recent revisionist history of the British empire, which has been drawn on extensively by supporters of its American successor to argue that their empire too has been beneficial to the world. Unfortunately, the similarities between the two empires lie elsewhere. For example, as Johnson argues, both empires have been 'comfortable with the idea of forcing thousands of people to be free by slaughtering them'.

Francisco Domínguez charts the progress of the Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela, in an article that analyses the circumstances that have allowed a left government to fend off assaults from the enforcers of the Washington consensus. He acknowledges that oil money and the current international preoccupation with terror have given Chavez a rare opportunity to consolidate the revolution, but argues that Chavez has used this opportunity well: his strategy of building mass participation in the public life of the country will remain crucial to the government's success.

Recent developments in South America have helped to keep alive the idea that another world is possible. Pat Devine addresses other means of resisting the market-dogma view of the world, by putting forward a non-market model of economic

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planning, one that does not rely on the state as the main director of economic governance and public management. His alternative model proposes social ownership based on participatory planning.

Cormac Cullinan offers another exercise in thinking differently. He argues that western legal systems must move away from an Enlightenment-based view in which humans are distinct from the rest of the world, with everything non-human seen as a 'natural resource', available for exploitation. Jurisprudence needs to find a way of acknowledging the rights of other species. Anthony Jackson and Nigel Mullan point to the connections between early modern notions of property, whereby civilised legal systems could confer rights to non-civilised land, and current moves to claim ownership of life forms by enclosing them within the framework of patent law. TRIPS legislation, far from recognising a plurality of life worlds, is seeking to turn all forms of life into property.

Finally Stuart Hall talks to Bill Schwarz about the importance of culture to politics, and in particular its importance in thinking about the negotiation of difference. As he argues, culture is constitutive of the political: without understanding that we won't understand politics - and we certainly won't be able to imagine ways of living in a globalised world whose boundaries are everywhere contested.

## **Cultures of capitalism seminars and online discussion forum**

The aim of *Soundings* is to enable people to think together as part of a plural, left intellectual culture that can connect with political struggles for social transformation. It seeks to generate imaginative and philosophical ideas about culture and politics, and give shape to viable political strategies. *Soundings* functions as an institutional space that facilitates networking and the sharing of ideas. To this end it is more than just a journal, and this autumn we begin a series of seminars and an online discussion on the cultures of capitalism, which we hope will contribute to the process of rebuilding an alternative left project. *Soundings*, in association with Compass, *Renewal* and *Red Pepper* and with the support of Middlesex University, is bringing people together to ask critical and strategic questions about contemporary changes in capitalism and modernity.

The left needs to develop an analysis of contemporary global capitalism, its

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modes of capital accumulation and their impact on individuals, classes and society. What has happened to class on a national and global level? Who will emerge as the agents of political change? In a globalised world what kind of political organisation will be a vehicle for this change? The left has to forge a new language and culture in order to confront liberal market capitalism with viable alternative ways of life. What philosophical, cultural and theoretical resources do we need to develop new understandings of political and social transformation? We hope that the seminars will develop into a longer term organised collective discussion on these questions.

If you are unable to come to the seminars, you can join the online discussion forum at [www.soundings.org.uk](http://www.soundings.org.uk).

### **Readers questionnaire**

Thanks to everyone who sent in their responses to our reader's questionnaire. They've been helpful in planning the redesign of the journal. We hope you like it. The prize draw has now taken place and the winner of the £150 prize draw is David Moon from Glamorgan.

# Soundings

## **Soundings 'Cultures of Capitalism' Seminars**

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

**All seminars are from 11am to 4pm**

### **14 December: Re-imagining individual life**

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

*Zygmunt Bauman, Jo Littler, Hari Kunzru, Tony Blackshaw (chair)*

### **18 January 2008: Understanding society and remaking politics**

What sociological ideas do we need to understand the changes in society and social relations brought about by the new cultures of capitalism, and to develop a new politics of the left?

*Beatrix Campbell, Michael Rustin, Richard Sennett, Nira Yuval-Davis (chair)*

### **22 February 2008: The financialisation of capitalism**

Financialisation is 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, Andrew Glyn, John Christensen, Martin McIvor (chair)*

Registration for each seminar costs £15, or £40 for a block booking of the whole series. Send cheque payable to Soundings to Lawrence & Wishart, PO Box 7701, Latchingdon, Chelmsford, CM3 6WL. Or go to [www.soundings.org.uk](http://www.soundings.org.uk) - where free tickets are on offer to new standing order subscribers.

Further details from [sally@lwbooks.co.uk](mailto:sally@lwbooks.co.uk)  
or [j.rutherford@mdx.ac.uk](mailto:j.rutherford@mdx.ac.uk)

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