

# Editorial

---

## Living in interesting times

As Grahame Thompson argues in his article in this issue, neoliberalism is common sense now, in the way that social democracy was during the postwar era. Its assumptions are unnoticed and taken for granted. In this issue of *Soundings* contributors explore some of the effects of neoliberal hegemony - internationally, in society, and in our heads. There is no doubt that the new common sense is a powerful organising force. And yet, while we recognise its power, we can also see areas of weakness and sites of contestation: and we can see that the effects of neoliberalism - financial crisis, global and national inequality, ecological crisis, a 'broken society' - create the conditions for its waning as an ideological driving force. The awareness of its destructiveness is growing.

The first five articles in this issue engage with the global power of multinational companies and their supporting institutions. But each also points to resistance. Lin Chun argues that, contrary to popular belief, the solution to China's problems is not more marketisation. She also argues that there is widespread recognition of this in China, where the state's reforms are now entering a third phase, and balancing back towards a more people-orientated policy. She argues that the excesses of globalisation and financialisation have been undermining the state's developmental efforts, and it is in danger of being taken over by outside imperatives rather than developing its own internal traditions and resources. However there is room for cautious optimism here, as the state's history of social transformation and revolution - which she argues has underpinned much of its economic success - has created a heritage which is capable of developing in a different direction. This is an important argument, since China could play a crucial role in offering alternatives to neoliberal globalisation.

As Shaun Gregory shows, Pakistan is a country that amply demonstrates the failures of the Washington consensus, particularly as it manifests itself in the 'war on terror'. Pakistan has been wrecked by opportunist collusion between the interests of its own regional elite and those of the US - both of which strongly lean towards the military exercise of force. Perhaps the people of Pakistan will now have the opportunity, with the discrediting of Musharraf and the prospect of new leadership

## Editorial

in the US, to begin to build an accountable state. Ray Bush describes the dismal effects of neoliberal globalisation on African political economy. The ‘international community’ prescription for Africa is based on securing access to its raw materials and land at the cheapest possible prices: it is being turned into a continent whose production and self determination is subordinated to the demands of Western consumption. However, there is resistance here too, though it is frequently disorganised by powerful outside forces.

John Grahl outlines the EU’s consistent sacrifice of social objectives to the overriding priority of market-led economic integration, and shows how the Lisbon treaty seeks to entrench neoliberalism as part of the constitution. As he points out, however, a corporate Europe will struggle to win popular support and sustain its political legitimacy. James Marriott takes BP as a case study of a multinational seeking to make its priorities dominant, in this case seeking a solution to the energy crisis whereby consumers rather than producers bear the brunt of change. Here again, the company has a difficult case to make.

A second cluster of articles, including Grahame Thompson’s, look at the deeply embedded nature of the structures of neoliberalism. Grahame’s argument is that we should take this reality on board and direct some of neoliberalism’s programme against itself, for example by pointing to some of the contradictions in the corporate responsibility agenda. Mark Andrejevic shows how social networking sites are part of the corporate world, whether we like it or not. Commercially supported social networking sites have become productive resources for their owners, who profit from the value-producing activities of their members. Personal information is being privatised and turned into a tradable commodity. Jonathan Hardy points to the steady movement towards privatisation in broadcasting, heavily assisted by the regulators. In both cases people’s pleasures are mobilised to drive the consolidation of private ownership: but here too consumer choice is yoked to an agenda that ultimately fails to deliver the pleasures it promises.

A third group of articles looks at the ‘broken society’ argument. Jonathan Rutherford analyses the Cameron Tories’ success in promoting a new social agenda. As he argues, this agenda is important, and society does need mending - but not in the ways the Tories suggest. Since they do not recognise inequality as a key source of breakdown, and see no role for the state in providing support to people, the few policy solutions offered so far suggest that the New Conservatism will not be able to

# Soundings

break from the legacy of Thatcher. Meanwhile Labour is unable to intervene in this agenda since it too seeks solutions in the market, while its technocratic management of our lives through the state is deeply unpopular.

Paul Hoggett also argues that Labour's prescription for Britain's melancholia does not understand its underlying causes. He points to the bankruptcy of the government's belief that socially created malaise can be treated individually, through regearing individual thought habits. As he argues, what is needed is a shift away from the management of people, and on to a focus on relationships, including the way that inequality itself structures relationships.

Guy Redden's article on binge-drinking shows how government policy seeks to educate people to drink less, rather than to regulate the alcohol industry's promotion of new cultures of drinking; here again there is no attempt to limit the power of producers, and no understanding of the cultural forces that reinforce particular patterns of consumption. Liz Kelly argues that violence against women is another area where government attempts to intervene have been weakened by their failure to recognise the material impact of culture - in this case cultures of masculinity, whether manifest in men's violence or in the masculine cultures of policing and the law. In spite of the modernism of the government's legislation on violence against women, there has been little change in the abysmal rates of conviction in this area, while the steady erosion of a culture of support means that there are fewer services now available to women seeking refuge and justice than there were in the 1980s.

At the moment the Tories have the initiative in the debate on the social recession - and there is no doubt that it is a debate that has popular resonance. It is therefore important to intervene to make a socialist case for a supportive society, and for pointing to the connections between misery and structural inequality (see ad on page 176 for forthcoming *Soundings* discussion on these themes). We end on an optimistic note - with extracts from the diary of John Jordan and Isa Fremeaux's journey through utopian communities in Europe. Here we can remind ourselves that that other worlds are possible, and that people can make new histories - even in these hard times.

Finally, we would like to welcome our new poetry editor, Ruth Borthwick. Ruth is the Director of Planet Poetry, which can be found at [www.planetpoetry.co.uk](http://www.planetpoetry.co.uk). In this issue we link up with the Queer literary journal Chroma.