‘Another World is Possible’: Making politics across time

Tensions

As I got home from a meeting with old friends who I had been politically active with in the early 1970s in a group that called itself ‘East London Big Flame’, I was still left with the feeling that I mentioned as we were all sitting together in the hospitable space of the Wellcome café opposite Euston Station, of how remarkable it was that we were just sitting together around a small table after all these years. There was a warmth and intensity of the discussions that took off in different directions and it felt strange how we could just naturally talk to each other and share anxieties of belonging and not belonging to the group as it formed and had its life all those years ago. It was a kind of time travelling but it seemed so easy that it was difficult to remind ourselves that it had been 40 years ago that we were talking about. We had all lived different lives since then and taken different directions even if some connections and friendships remained more alive than others, but we all seemed able to laugh as we recalled these earlier selves as ‘revolutionaries’ and ‘activists’ whose lives has been shaped by the events in Paris in May 1968 and the student movements that emerged globally to challenge American imperialism in the Vietnam War.

I remembered my mother often saying that the she felt as if she lived two lives and that she could not really connect to the life that she had lived in Vienna before she was forced to seek refuge in London as the Nazi troops moved into occupy Vienna. She recalled how she has been warned by a school friend who was now a policeman she met on the street to leave as soon as she could, if she did not already know that her life was in danger. We felt the warmth that was conveyed when she talked about Vienna and connections would be made through the Schwarzwalde Torte – the black forest cake with morello cherries and fresh cream that we celebrated birthdays with. It was through talking almost daily on the telephone in Viennese German with a friend that had also made the journey from Vienna that she made a connection through language, but she still felt that she could barely recognise her former self. I think that I am mentioning this both because it recalls how lives close to me were split in ways that I could not really appreciate at the time, with the different parts being somehow ripped apart into discrete selves that

had difficulty in recognising each other, let alone shaping a language in which they could communicate with each other. But it was also out of a realisation that these traumatic histories, that still affected and partly shaped who we were, were not talked about in those years of political activism. We were somehow committed to a vision that 'another world was possible' and that if we pushed hard enough and together, we would be able to bring it into existence. This was more than a hope that we lived with, it was a feeling that was shared by others who were politically active and in part defined the experience of a generation.

As we sat around the table – and I think this was the third meeting I had attended with the idea of shaping a web site that could archive and share the political activities we were engaged with – we were aware, not only of how our lives had changed but also how the world had changed in so many ways, not least through the technologies that a younger generation of Occupy activists took for granted to organise their communications and helped shape their politics. But if we had taken different paths, the conversations we were having had a particular intensity as well as joy possibly because this part of our lives had become speakable after decades when those years of political activism and Marx reading groups were treated with indifference. Younger generations that I had been teaching Sociology to at Goldsmiths through the 80s and 90s often felt that they knew all they wanted to know about Marx and Marxism from their A-levels and that it was already familiar to them so they did not need to know more. Often they would just turn off and I had to think carefully in different decades how I could reach them and make these ideas relevant to the market ambitions of future careers in which education has often been reduced to a mere means to earning a good salary.

But as we sat together there was a realisation that with the Occupy movement there has been a shift in generational dynamics that meant that a younger generation was actively interested in knowing more about traditions of activist politics and the student movements in their institutions in the 1970s. There had been a number of exciting encounters in Goldsmiths where I was able to share these histories and experiences and it somehow helped to bring them alive for me in a different way. I had not really had a language in which I could talk about the activist politics of the 1970s and if I tried to frame the experience in a way that felt relevant, it was often difficult to communicate to those who recognised little connection between intellectual work and transforming the social and political world.

Within a 'post-feminist' world in which students often regarded

feminism as the ‘f-word’ and as a ‘topic’ that they knew about because they had covered it in their A2 work, there was little experienced connections between ‘the personal’ and ‘the political’, even though this could be written about as a fundamental insight that feminisms brought to the humanities and social sciences. Feminism belonged to their mothers’ generation and they felt that they could take gender equality for granted so that it was a matter of competing as individuals with boys who they felt more or less equal to. Experience as a category had been made suspect within post-structuralist traditions so in different ways the personal and the emotional had become strangely unspeakable within the traditions of social theory they were learning.

But what was also striking for us, as we sat around the table at Wellcome and it was said in different ways, was that in many ways we knew very little about each other’s backgrounds and family histories. Some people did not know that some of us were Jewish or that this could have had any real significance, especially since there were pro-Palestinian posters around and otherwise relatively little discussion about the politics of the Middle East. Somehow we had learnt from Marx that we had to transcend differences, and possibly that the only differences that had a material base were differences of class that remained central to an analysis of the workings of a capitalist mode of production. Though this was not strictly true either – since we were committed to feminism and a sexual politics that could engage critically with men and masculinities, and which was critical of a homophobic culture, and was clearly anti-racist and was engaged with struggles against fascism on the streets of London.

Our politics at the time were concerned with ‘struggling in every area of our lives’, as the slogan went. But it was real in the sense that the social movements that were emerging at the time made it possible to *make connections* between different spheres of life that a liberal capitalism had insisted on keeping sharply separated. Work lives were not to be separated from family and intimate relations, and we had learnt that relations of power stretched across both the personal and the political. Part of the energy and excitement in the libertarian and anti-authoritarian politics that we were shaping with others in libertarian socialist groups across the country was in refusing traditional political distinctions on the Left between public and private spheres, between work and community, between wage and unwaged labour, between power and emotions. There was a sense that with the influence of feminism and sexual politics we were shaping a different kind of socialist politics, and recognised freedom and equality in the quality of relationships that people could create and sustain across the boundaries of their different spheres of life.

But there was a universalism that was still framed through a transcendence of differences that also explained why it was only in the spaces we later developed as Red Therapy that we found ways of sharing our different family histories and trajectories. This was a step too far for members of ELBF who had a stronger workerist emphasis and whose class politics involved a degree of proletarianisation. Of course this has a different meaning for those of us who had come from working class backgrounds, even if we had gone to elite universities, but it remained a tension that was resolved in different ways. It became an issue for those of us who worked in the Fords Group that worked around the Fords plant at Dagenham along with a group in Big Flame in Liverpool who were working around, as the phrase was, the Ford Plant at Halewood.

We were largely thought of as 'students' and realised that it was only through being honest and communicating directly that we could work with the Afro-Caribbean and Asian workers in the different plants in Dagenham. Some of us took jobs in the plant and we did form close working relationships with people who identified with the ways we were working *with them* enabling them through the leaflets we distributed together to spread information across the different plants and sometimes across different factories, not only in the UK but across the Genk in Belgium and the Ford plant in Cologne where there were also activist groups working. We were critical of Leninist traditions and so of a vanguardist politics that would place us in leadership positions. Rather we sought to work with people and were fully aware that we were learning as much from everyday political work as we were bringing to others. This helped to define the libertarian Marxism that we were developing that in different ways sought to cross the traditional boundaries between Marxist and Anarchist traditions as well traditions of Anarcho-Syndicalism.

We would read Georges Sorel as well as Marx. Alexandra Kollontai would help to question more economistic readings of Marx as she insisted that the feminist revolution could not wait to be delivered after capitalism had been overthrown but was an integral part of revolutionary struggle. But we also read Rosa Luxemburg as we read Emma Goldman and the prison writings of Alexander Berkman. We also read Wilhelm Reich's *The Sexual Revolution* and *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* that showed the workings of authoritarianism on the shaping of bodies and emotional lives – because we were also engaged in challenging the mind-body split that had shaped a Cartesian Enlightenment modernity, and so in the forming of a body politics that was alive to issues of gender, 'race' and sexuality. The language of 'struggle' was everywhere but possibly it makes more sense post-2008

and the global financial crisis and policies of austerity that have followed in its wake.

Translations

How can we hope to open up a dialogue between the political activists of the 1970s and the Occupy movements that emerged in the wake of the financial crisis? How can we find a language that is adequate to the excitements and commitments of the hopeful transformative times in the early 1970s when there were not only industrial struggles but challenges to the legitimation of capitalist democracies that sought to control their populations while denying them the ability to control their own lives which real democracy promised? As a generation we sought new forms of knowledge but also new forms of class experience so that we could engage in more meaningful and less abstract ways with the ongoing challenges to the power of capital to create societies in its own image. The Vietnam War had made visible the collusions of the universities and the military-industrial complex that was fighting an imperialist war. We learnt that knowledge was not innocent, impartial or objective but was tied to interests and would often legitimate relations of capitalist power and control. There were certain connections that had been made visible by the social struggles of the time that made evident different forms of social suffering and the inequalities of a class society. But there were also tensions between an orthodox Marxism that could only acknowledge that sufferings were real if they took place in the public realm and feminisms and sexual politics that recognised gender and sexual oppressions that stretched across the boundaries of 'private' and 'public' spheres so bringing into questions these categories that had shaped the liberal moral theory that we had been brought up to take for granted.

But it was also vital that we were a generation that was born into the benefits of the post-war Welfare State and that it was through the state that we had been educated and also financed through universities. Even if we were wary of the ways that welfare institutions had become bureaucratic so that, for example, in the health service people were often treated as numbers who had to be processed as they learnt to be obedient to a medical profession that was still largely masculine and which assumed that it had an authority over women's bodies. So women felt unheard as if to ask questions was already to question medical authority,

and they had to accept that doctors would rely on their 'objective' knowledge while women's knowledge of their own bodies was deemed to be *merely* 'subjective' and 'anecdotal'. So the women's health movement was vital in challenging the patriarchal forms of medical knowledge as it insisted that women gain through democratic practices of self-examination knowledge of their own bodies and so control over their own lives. They recognised the ways their bodies had been appropriated by medical knowledge and argued that there had to be a dialogue in which women's voices were to be heard and respected. This was a vital example of the control over bodies that was part of the demand that people should have *control* over 'every area of our lives', as the rhetoric of the time went.

If this was a vital aspect of libertarian socialist politics it was a control that was not to be granted to individuals because of their power on the market but was to be framed collectively in the redesign of state and welfare institutions so that they could be made democratically accountable. We were wary in the industrial sector of traditional ideas of 'workers' control' since this often meant the incorporation of trade union officials and shop stewards into the capitalist hierarchy so that they were given positions on the board. We were inspired by factory occupations, such as the Lip occupation in France that sought to give workers themselves real power over the control of their factories. We sought to transform institutions, including state institutions so that they were democratically accountable and the structures of financial power and control transparent also to workers who were committing their labour and lives. As it was, firms could decide to move their operations to East Asia because of the cheaper labour costs, and workers who had given their lives would suddenly find themselves redundant and bereft of a future.

As it was with the market ideologies of Thatcherism, notions of control were translated into the language of Thatcherism and her promise to sell council houses to the working class who lived in them. She framed a market libertarianism that sought to privatise state industries in the language of freedom from state control. She sought to shrink the state and appropriate a language of libertarianism of the right that was framed in individualistic and possessive terms. If industries could no longer compete on the global market they would be allowed to go to the wall, and large sectors of British manufacturing was to disappear in the wake of the miner's strikes and the resistances of organised labour.

The terms of institutional power had shifted, and Thatcher had somehow taken the moral initiative through translating left critiques of bureaucratic authority into challenges to the public sector itself and the

re-evaluation of the private as the sphere of wealth creation and so of risk, initiative and enterprise. The public sector had little to teach and everything to learn from the private sector as the Labour Party under Blair was to redefine itself largely in the market terms provided by Thatcher, depending on the financial sector and service sectors to sustain New Labour expenditure on schools and hospitals. There was to be no alternative to the disciplines of a globalised capitalism, and the City was to be deregulated as a politics of redistribution was to be abandoned by a Labour Party that was focussed upon issues of wealth creation in the City. Supposedly bankers knew best and they were to be allowed to regulate their own financial affairs.

The idea that people should have 'control over their own lives' was translated into market terms, and with the fall of the Soviet Union it seemed self-evident that Marxisms had little to offer and that this marked 'the end of history', with the capitalist market economy being the *only* alternative. At the same time both Thatcher and later Blair talked about freedom but they were both centralising governments and New Labour was to be accused of 'control freakery' – they did not trust people to make decisions for themselves. They had their own visions of democratic accountability but these were largely framed in market terms. The market knew best and it was through the market that people were to be free to make their own decisions, whether it had to do with new Academies in education that were to be 'set free' from local authority control or the health service in which people were to be free to decide on whatever hospital they wanted to go to, and the resources would supposedly follow.

There was a certain appeal for a younger generation about the freedom that was being offered in a globalised capitalism that manifested itself in the new technologies with a global reach. While jobs were available and markets were expanding and there was an economy of easy credit, people felt somehow empowered as consumers. It was through commodities and shaping their own bodies, often through surgical interventions, that they could feel free to re-make themselves in their own image. For a while, as postmodern ideas flourished, a younger generation felt they could affirm control over their own lives – and women felt empowered to compete on equal terms with men. Feminism became the 'f-word', and they assumed it belonged to their mother's generation but did not really speak to their own freedom and self-determination to make their own identities within a celebrity culture of gender equality.

In the 1990s, the 1970s felt like a long time ago and the political languages that were shaped by libertarian socialists seemed to have been individualised and privatised. Politics seemed a world apart in control of

professional politicians who people had become suspicious of, since they often believed that they were out for themselves. If there was a crisis of democratic authority it had largely to do with a younger generation withdrawing from a sense of hope and feeling that, as individuals, they could only shape their own lives. Fewer people were voting and fewer people felt that their politicians represented them. But for many this was the way the world was, and as a generation people thought of themselves as being 'realistic' and so as no longer sharing the ideals of an older generation. They were politically involved around issues that concerned them, and they did care passionately about them and would show this through their commitment to Friends of the Earth or against factory farming. But these were largely single-issue campaigns – and the possibilities of a larger vision of social and political transformation seemed romantic, even naïve, within a globalised world.

Rememberings

The cover of G2 in the *Guardian* on Friday had a cover page for a new release that said "Remember the first time you saw *Star Wars* or *Back to the Future* or *Blade Runner*? Films you knew you would never forget? *Looper* is just like that." SFX This is quite a claim, but what struck me is that even if I can recall these films they do not carry the same resonance as for a generation that had grown up in the 1980s who could partly be defined by them. *Looper* is a gripping time-travel, sci-fi thriller set in the future, in 2044, and also 30 years further ahead than that. As Peter Bradshaw describes it in his review 'In 2074, time travel is invented, and at once made illegal by a nervous government; at the same time, surveillance technology and CSI-style forensic skills make killing people very difficult, so crime syndicates get hold of a samizdat time-travel device and use this to 'remove' troublesome people. Victims are whooshed back in time 30 years where lowly-paid assassins blast them with shotguns and get paid in silver bars strapped to the victim's body. But there's a catch. The killers are known as 'loopers', because one day they must close the loop. Their future middle-aged selves must be liquidated, because they have amassed too much information, so they are sent back in time for assassination with the special retirement payoff of gold bars strapped on them. The younger self must them pull the trigger, and accept, with as much zen calm as possible, his disappearance in 30 years." (The *Guardian* G2 Friday 28.09.12 p.19)

There is a kind of time-travelling that is made available as a younger generation – because of the global financial crisis and the Occupy movements that sought to challenge the irresponsibility of the banking sector and somehow make them accountable for the crisis they created rather than working people in the real economy – discover an interest in the political activism of the 1970s. They want to understand how we organised and how we learnt about the 'tyranny of structurelessness' as a pamphlet from the time framed it, but they also know that they are attempting a translation of political forms across time and different technological worlds. But there is also a realisation that mass consumer culture has sought to trivialise feminism and the social movements of the 1970s in its representations of 'hippy culture' as inept and other-worldly. This is a form of political assassination that is perpetrated by the mass media that makes it difficult to assess the experiments in alternative ways of living and relating. Rather than recognise these social experiments in setting many of the terms for later social policies and the transformation of gender and sexual relations – so that gay marriage becomes a clearly supported policy across political parties despite the opposition of the traditional churches.

It is difficult to take people back in time but if there is a present imagination that is seeking to respond to its own issues of democratic organisation within the Occupy movement then it might be possible to create a dialogue across generations. In part it is a matter of discovering a contemporary language through which some of the insights and political struggles of the past can be expressed, with reducing them or trivialising them. In part it has been the 2008 global financial crisis that has brought into question the legitimations of capitalism that had seemed so firmly in place during years of plenty for the industrialised North. Somehow the terms of a neo-liberal culture and ethics had come to define the 'common-sense' of a generation and it was difficult, as Gramsci recognised, to bring into question this particular hegemony because it seemed to have been accepted across the traditional political spectrum. It seemed obvious for parents to seek the 'best education' for their children even if middle-class parents also felt guilty because they knew that private schools could only be afforded by the few, at the same time as New Labour talked about the quality of education for all our children.

As a generation we are defined by particular events and memories so that, for example, a new generation of students this year are the first that do not carry memories of the death of Diana and the days that followed on the streets of the capital. For them it is something they have learnt as history. For them the Velvet Underground might be almost ancient history. They are unlikely to appreciate the 30 minutes with John Cale

from The Velvet Underground who was asked by Tim Jonze, 'Was escapism important to you growing up?' 'Yes, it was, I don't know how else to write songs. Writing a song is escapism, taking time out of real life to face real problems. You're dealing with your dream memories. But I don't want to end up in Pseud's Corner here, so I'd better be careful." (The *Guardian* G2 28.09.12 p.3)

The idea of 'real life' and facing 'real problems' somehow echoes with the politics of the 1970s and also the influence of Laing as one of the speakers at the Dialectics of Liberation conference at the Roundhouse in June 1967 that was such a formative experience for me as I had just come down from Oxford. It was the interconnections that were afforded by the variety of speakers who were all analysing the present, and calling for transformations not just in the capitalist economy but across different institutional spheres. There was Jules Henry and Goodman talking about childhood and the authoritarian ways in which schools deny freedom to children and so a libertarian politics of childhood that was concerned with shaping new forms of schooling and educational practice. John Holt's *How Children Fail* and the writings of George Dennison and Herb Kohl had a widespread currency as people were imagining different ways of relating to children and encouraging their intellectual and emotional growth and development.

Stokely Carmichael was also at the Roundhouse speaking about the Black Power movement and the tensions with the Civil Rights movement that had been such a powerful influence in shaping an anti-racist politics as part of the libertarian left traditions. The words of Martin Luther King's dream speech echoed across time and space, and the Civil Rights Movement helped shape a vision of black consciousness that called on individuals to take responsibility for their own lives within larger movements for structural transformation. The idea of 'black is beautiful' struck a widespread chord because it recognised that people had to become the revolution they wanted to bring about. It challenged the distinction between personal change that could be seen as 'self-indulgent' within a Protestant moral culture, as I explored in *Recreating Sexual Politics: Men, Feminism and Politics*. It recognised how racism worked to demean people in their own eyes and to shame their own experience. It encouraged a transformation of values as people learnt to value and honour what had been demeaned and denigrated within the dominant white culture that defined blackness as relationship of inferiority and subordination. In this way the black consciousness movements, –as they were also framed in South African struggles against apartheid in the writings and activism of Steve Biko that challenged the narrower 'race as class'-based politics of the ANC – sought to make connections between

the psyche and relations of power, between the ways people were made to feel about themselves, shamed in their own eyes, and the workings of racial relations of power and subordination.

The anti-segregation struggles in the United States, and in particular the struggles in Little Rock against school segregation, set the terms of an anti-racism that shaped an ethics and politics of empowerment: people were encouraged to question the ways they were being marked within the larger racist culture, and so to name the structures of white supremacy and the ways they did not only capture material sources and institutional power but helped to undermine people's sense of self-worth and self-respect in their own histories and cultures. As feminist author bell hooks has explored, this showed the significance in the United States of black churches that could sustain young people in their sense of self-worth, and it was out of this tradition that Luther King's Civil Rights Movement was able to draw its strength. There was a tradition of political theologies of liberation that helped shape a different vision of Christianity and its option for the poor and oppressed. But it was also empowering people to make changes in their own personal lives so that they could value what a dominant culture had sought to degrade and demean.

As people learnt to value their lives in different ways it was not simply shifting attitudes towards themselves, so learning that it was possibly true for black to be beautiful, but this involved a *process* of personal and political transformation. It was a process that took time and would need the support of others who were involved in a similar way in redefining themselves and so learning to challenge the institutions of a dominant culture organised around notions of white superiority. There was a questioning of dominant notions of beauty as it was recognised that people could be beautiful in different ways. But within a neo-liberal capitalist culture it could be difficult to sustain these connections between the personal and the political, the affective and the institutional, as women were encouraged to feel that it was somehow their own fault if they were not successful within an individualistic and competitive culture. If they failed or proved themselves to be 'losers' then it was only themselves that they could blame – for they had to take responsibility for their own lives and could not blame a racist society or institutions for their own individual failings. It became difficult to recognise that with second class schools and large numbers of pupils seeking the attention of the teacher, it was difficult to produce first-class results and that, in any case, ideas of equality of opportunity only worked to select out the few while leaving the vast majority marked as individual failures who only had themselves to blame.

If African American writers such as Alice Walker and Maya Angelou insisted on sustaining connections between the personal and the political, they were drawing on a longer tradition that also sought to question the sexism that was sustained in the influential writings of Eldridge Cleaver in *Soul on Ice* and George Jackson's *Prison Writings* which were influential in shaping the anti-war social movements against the Vietnam War. Feminisms were encouraged to engage more directly with issues of 'race', ethnicities and religious traditions as they were encouraged to question the universal nature of 'woman' as a category. Though the libertarian left politics of the 1970s had its own forms of universalism it had at the same time an awareness of the importance of the personal and so of the time and attention it takes for people to find 'their own voices' as it was framed at the time.

There were different readings of consciousness-raising as a philosophical-political practice which the women's movement had developed in order to illuminate the connections between what women might regard as their private and personal experiences and the emotions they carried and the ways that women were treated and their experiences trivialised within dominant patriarchal cultures. But this could be framed as a movement from the personal to the political, as women recognised that they had to challenge traditional patriarchal relationships that worked to silence them and subordinate their own desires and possibilities of happiness and self-realisation to their partners and children. But there were also readings that were less reductive and appreciated the entanglements between personal and emotional lives and institutional relationships of power. They appreciated the difficulties that women, but also men, could have in engaging with the emotional histories that they carried from childhood, and the gender and sexual expectations that people had somehow internalised as their own. This called for notions of reflexivity that could acknowledge different levels or layers of experience while recognising the support that people needed to make changes in their everyday lives and relationships.

Everyday life and politics

Emerging out of the student movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s was a vision that people should be prepared to *live their politics*. Politics was not a matter of electoral politics that had to do with choosing a

political party to vote for every four or five years. Rather there was a sense of the democracy of everyday life, institutions and relationships. This partly emerged out of a critique of educational knowledge and practice and a call for greater relevance. There was a questioning, partly stimulated by Paulo Freire's *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, that questions notions of knowledge as a commodity that could be passed from teachers to students in what he named as a 'banking' vision of education where knowledge was to be stored in notes to be collected and later 'cashed out' in examinations and qualifications. Freire called for a critical and creative vision of education and literacy that would encourage people to engage with their everyday lives and relationships. In this way people were to be able to *name* their own oppression and also question the legitimacy of prevailing structures of power and domination that somehow presented themselves to be 'fair' and 'democratic'.

But in time the language of oppression was to move out of favour as it seemed to rely upon certain humanistic assumptions of a fixed and given human nature and people found it hard to stay focussed on issues of social inequality that were growing alarmingly with a globalised neo-liberalism. A younger generation of women were experiencing violence in their intimate relations, but being under 18 they were not recognised as 'adults' so fell outside the legislation of domestic violence and also the support available. But also assuming a culture of gender equality that could result in them finding themselves bereft of a language through which they could contest the relations of power in their relationships. Since feminism was a language crafted in the 1970s it did not seem to speak to the cyber bullying they might experience and the threats or violence they felt subject too. They had absorbed a neo-liberal discourse of individual choice so they held themselves responsible for the decisions that they had made so it was their fault if they discovered themselves in a violent relationship and it was up to them to either change their partner's behaviour or leave the relationship. Neo-liberalism crafted a 'common-sense' that declared that people were responsible for the miseries and social sufferings they were obliged to endure because it was *their fault* if they had not worked hard at school or did not have the abilities to succeed. If they were *losers* then they only had themselves to blame.

Neo-liberalism has shaped a moral culture that is radically individualistic and encourages individuals to blame themselves if things do not work out for them. If there is value in a language of responsibility it has to be balanced against a sense of growing inequalities and mass youth unemployment. It also has to recognise that the current Coalition government has directly attacked the future hopes of a generation through withdrawing the EMA – the Educational Maintenance Allowance that

encouraged young people to stay on in education while giving them a level of financial independence that made them less dependent on their parents. This gave them an incentive to stay on at school or college and for many it was a turning point in their experience of education with some going on to higher education. With the threefold increase in student fees, many students from working-class backgrounds who would be wary of the large debts they would incur would think twice about staying in education. But this management of expectations fits with the Coalition's recreating of the binary system in higher education as it encourages some elite universities to expand while others who do not attract high levels AAB students are penalised. Higher education is becoming again the providence of the middle class even though there is a language of widening participation.

Possible futures

As everyday life gets more fraught in a time of austerity and the widening crisis of the Euro, there is a renewal of activist politics and a willingness to question the ethical terms of a globalised neo-liberal capitalism. As Ha-Joon Chang author of *23 Things They Don't Tell You About Capitalism* writes, throughout the 1980s and 90s many developing countries were in crisis and the IMF's structural adjustment programmes which imposed austerity, privatisation and deregulation led to waves of protest known as 'IMF Riots'. As Chang recognises, 'those rioters were not just expressing general discontent but reacting against austerity measures that directly threatened their livelihoods, such as cuts in subsidies to basic commodities such as food and water, and cuts in already meagre welfare payments.' (The *Guardian* Saturday 29 September 2012 p.42) The IMF was to learn and make some changes – becoming more cautious in pushing for financial deregulation and austerity programmes – but as Chang saw, 'The IMF programme, in other words, met such resistance because its designers had forgotten that behind the numbers they were crunching were real people.'(p.42)

But given these recent changes in the IMF, Chang acknowledges that 'it is ironic to see the European governments inflicting an old-IMF-style programme on their own populations….who are supposedly your ultimate sovereigns.' He also notes that 'The threat to livelihoods has reached such a dimension that renewed bouts of rioting are now rocking Greece,

Spain and even the usually quieter Portugal' and realises that 'recent events raise a very serious question about the nature of European politics.' He helpfully draws attention to the fact that 'What has been happening in Europe – and indeed in the US in a more muted and dispersed form – is nothing short of a complete rewriting of the implicit social contracts that have existed since the end of the second world war. In these contracts, renewed legitimacy was bestowed on the capitalist system, once totally discredited following the great depression. In return it provided a welfare state that guaranteed minimum provision of all those burdens that most citizens have to content with throughout their lives – childcare, education, health, unemployment, disability and old age.' As Chang also notes, the rewriting of these social contracts is not unprecedented and it is not that their scope and speed is unusually large, 'It is more that the rewriting is being done through the back door.'(p.42)

This is why issues of democracy and democratic accountability have returned with such intensity, creating a bridge to the crisis of imperial legitimacy produced by the Vietnam War. As Chang notes, 'Instead of being explicitly cast as a rewriting of the social contract, changing people's entitlements and changing the way the society establishes its legitimacy, the dismembering of the welfare state is presented as a technocratic exercise of "balancing the books". Democracy is neutered in the process and the protests against the cuts are dismissed. The description of the externally imposed Greek and Italian governments as "technocratic" is the ultimate proof of the attempt to make the radical writing of the social contract more acceptable by pretending that it isn't really a political change.'(p.42)

As Chang points to the dangers he helpfully concludes that 'The danger is not only that these austerity measures are killing the European economies but also that they threaten the very legitimacy of European democracies – not just directly by threatening the livelihoods of so many people and pushing the economy into a downward spiral, but also indirectly by undermining the legitimacy of the political system through this backdoor rewriting of the social contract.'(p.42) Chang seems to think that another world is possible and this is a view that is also framed by Jonathan Freedland who offers suggestions for Ed Miliband's speech to the 2012 Labour Party Conference in Blackpool under the heading 'There is an alternative. Another world is possible.' It was the headline that caught my attention as I had just returned from the ELBF meeting as it seemed to speak the tension between Thatcher's insistence 'there is no alternative' which is being echoed by the Tory Coalition in its deficit reduction strategy and the larger political vision that seems promised in the idea – itself traceable back to the political transformations of the

1970s and the social movements of the time – that 'Another world is possible.'

As Freedland offers his gift of words to Ed Miliband he writes in a way that resonated with my own family history which remained largely unspeakable within the universalist politics of the Big Flame and showing how we have moved on to acknowledge not only the dignity of difference but the need for people with diverse histories and cultures to learn how to live together: 'I know that many of the people watching at home will feel as if they don't yet know me. You might have heard that my parents were Jewish refugees fron the Nazis, two young people hounded out of a Europe that wanted people like them wiped out – but who found a haven right here in Britain. That history lives on inside me, even if I'm only now coming to grips with what it means for me and for the young sons Justin and I are raising.' (The *Guardian* Saturday 29 September 2012 p. 43) I found this last sentence particularly poignant but was not sure whether Ed Miliband would take it in, but I hoped he would be able to.

Freedland goes on in the words offered to Miliband, 'But there's more to my personal story than that. I came of age in the era of Thatcherism, a time defined by the slogan, "There is no alternative". My parents, and the procession of activists and campaigners who sat round our kitchen table, refused to accept that. They believed – and I learned – that there is always an alternative. That another world is possible.

'So when I see the economy struggling to breathe, while the government says there is only plan A – no alternative – I won't accept it. Cutting the deficit is vital, but it has to be done at the right time and in the right way or else it will make things worse. The evidence is all around us in Europe, in Greece, or in Spain: austerity squeezes the life out of an economy at the very moment it needs more oxygen.

'George Osborne makes a fetish of cutting the deficit, but the joke – the cruel joke – is that he's making the problem worse, not better. The national debt has actually gone up 25% in two years under the coalition – and we've borrowed more this year than we did last. And it's no wonder, because only growth puts money into the national coffers. If that means short-term borrowing, so be it: after all, we are borrowing anyway. We can do it because, unlike the nations of the Eurozone, we control our own currency and can borrow cheaply… You see, there is an alternative to Plan A. Another world is possible.' But he also recognises 'That this means making the City the servant, not the master, of the real economy, as well as nurturing the industries that make things that people want to buy. Our labour market has become so short-term, so casualised, there's

too little investment in the training and apprenticeships that take time to reap rewards. If we're going to be a high-skill economy, that has to change. And it can. Because another world is possible.' (p.43)

But Freedland also shares a wider vision that seems to go beyond the terms of politics and economics – though it could go even wider if it engaged with the social movements that engaged with issues of gender, 'race', disabilility and sexualities so willing to think about freedom across the boundaries of private and public life. But at least he fully acknowledges that 'And this is about more than the economy. For years we were told private is better than public –more efficient, more modern. Well, when it came to the crunch this summer, who secured the Olympics: was it G4S or was it the fine men and women of the British military? When the private sector failed, Private Smith stepped in.

'London 2012 showed u7s that another Britain is possible: a place that is proud varied, hopeful and which knows that when we come together athletes, volunteers, and yes, government – there is no limit to what we can achieve. This is the Britain I dream of, a country that shows itself – and everyone else – that there is an alternative. That another world is possible.'(p.43) But as we also learnt from the Paralympics, this was a world that challenged the moral terms of a globalised market new liberalism because it questioned its visions of autonomy and independence and taught us to value interdependence and vulnerability as human qualities that can support people to achieve their highest hopes and aspirations. It was not simply a corporate vision of the strong excelling and overcoming the weak and dependent that it denigrated as 'losers', but it showed that people could be strong in different ways and that they could lean on each other in creating a more equal and free society. It was an experience that all that lived through it will be able to draw upon as a cultural memory showing in practice that another well organised and inspiring world is possible.

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