

# TRANSFORMING CAPITALISM AND THE POLITICS OF EVERYDAY LIFE

## Counter-Cultures and Left Politics

Growing up in the post-war Welfare State, many people who became active politically in the 1960s were the beneficiaries of the educational acts that made free education available to a wider section of the population and allowed many more working-class children to achieve in higher education. It helped to shape a vision of equality as 'equality of opportunity', which meant that those who could achieve in formal schooling could be encouraged to go further – though it was the comprehensive school that was to help break the hold of the 11-plus exam and the sharp divisions between grammar and secondary modern schools. But with a degree of post-war affluence, young people could get part-time jobs and so had money for themselves. It was this purchasing power that gave a certain degree of independence from families but also helped shape a new teenage counter-culture. The rock-and-roll teenagers were to have a sound and an identity of their own and there were conflicts between 'mods' and 'rockers' in sea-side towns, announcing the possibility of different styles and ways of being within 'youth-cultures' that insisted on the freedom to create their own realities.

Though modern pop is built on the denial of time with i-phones allowing people to mix sounds from different periods, as John Harris comments, 'Now and again, though, an occasion arrives that decisively reminds us how old post-Elvis popular culture now is – 5<sup>th</sup> October is the 50<sup>th</sup> birthday of the Beatles' first single, released back when Harold Macmillan was the PM, and the Cuban missile crisis was only weeks away.' As Harris notes, "'Love me Do" sounds like the world in which it was made, still feeling the pinch of post-war austerity. Ian MacDonald's wonderful song-by-song history of the group, *Revolution in the Head*, reckoned that the song's "modal gauntness" is subtly cunning, serving notice of the Beatles "unvarnished honesty", and via John Lennon's wailing harmonica part – the "blunt vitality" of their native Liverpool.'" (Review in *Saturday Guardian* 29.09.12 p.16.) In part it was the call to honesty so clearly expressed emotionally, and the vitality of the sound, that made those of us feel that another world was possible. We could recognise our hopes but also our unspoken anxieties about love and relationships expressed through the music. It opened up spaces that allowed us to break with the conformism of family life in post-war years of the nuclear family where it was often a matter of 'keeping up appearances' and 'keeping up with the Jones's', though this was inflected quite differently across diverse class and racial cultures.

As Harris recalls 'By early the following year, their songs were crowding the US charts, and they were about to play to 73 million Americans on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Once again, they were adopted as a panacea for cold and grim times – this time less a matter of the weather than the pall cast by the murder of President Kennedy.'"(p.16) As Harris recognises, the Beatles were influential in shaping a counter-culture that particularly through Lennon's move to New York related to anti-war movements on the Left and his anthem 'Give peace a chance' that has lived on to be invoked

by a diversity of peace movements. As Harris notes, the Beatles were part of ‘the shaking of English hierarchies; pop’s transmutation into a global culture; and the western world’s passage from a world still defined by the second world war and its aftermath, to the accelerated modernity we know today.’ (p.16) But in *Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* the Beatles brought together different strands of the counter-culture, including the experiments with drugs and an awareness of different levels of consciousness that was also influenced by contact with Eastern religious traditions and that remained particularly formative for George Harrison – who was concerned to explore relationships between Eastern and Western sound and spiritual traditions.

But it was the counter-culture that shaped hopes for different possible futures and helped sustain a vision that politics could be different and that it could be lived with honesty. As a generation we were affected by the anti-Vietnam war movement, and I recall as a student engaging with friends from the United States who had to make decisions about the draft. They also carried the influence of the Civil Rights movements and engaged with different movements for Black emancipations. There was the coming together of different streams within the counter-culture that could stretch from concerns with class and racial oppression to a tradition of anti-psychiatry which suggested that madness could be a rational response to an irrational and unequal capitalist world. Even if Laing tended to frame this in familial terms showing how the double-binds parents can leave their children in can help to create symptoms that can be recognised as a ‘rational response’ – even if showing itself in disturbed emotional and psychic symptoms – to an irrational capitalist world that talked about freedom, equality and justice while legitimating forms of class and racial injustice.

Feminisms helped enrich the counter-culture while developing certain of its streams through its striking awareness that ‘the personal is political’. Feminism encouraged women but also men to be more open and honest in relationships and more truthful with each other as they questioned the traditional terms of marriage and the dishonesties and silences that marked their own childhoods. Women questioned whether it was enough for men to be the breadwinner when they wanted men to be more emotionally present and loving in relationships. But this was something that men, particularly those who were boarding school survivors, could find difficult to do. Often they had closed down emotionally as a way of surviving their school experiences and just felt uneasy and confused by the demands their partners were making within heterosexual relationships. Often women reported feeling isolated and alone in their marriages, finding it impossible to communicate emotionally with their partners. They felt unloved and fearful that their partners did not know how to love because they had closed down any inner relationship with themselves. With the impact of feminism, many women initiated separations and divorces as they wanted a freedom to live their own lives and so to discover what would bring more meaningful experiences into their lives.

At the same time with consciousness-raising there was a tension with the familial frameworks of traditional psychoanalysis, which was itself put under pressure by the idea that ‘the personal is political’. Within the counter-culture people were concerned to shape different ways of living and relating as they sought to *live their politics*. There was also a challenge to the individualism that was sustained through traditional psychoanalysis, and a concern to explore the emotional impact of a wider range of relationships – not simply parental figures or even just sibling relationships. When I was in Boston for a year in 1970 I was introduced to new translations of Wilhelm Reich’s work, which proved enormously influential because it resonated with feminist work in its challenges to disembodied visions of knowledge within an Enlightenment framework. He recognised, as feminism was also exploring, the embodied nature of experience – and so helped to question the cognitive or mentalist framing of emotional life in Freud’s work when it conceived of mental life in terms of a relationship between conscious and unconscious mental states.

Reich frames a kind of body psychoanalysis that can work across the boundaries of mind and body and so questions the implicit rationalism of an Enlightenment modernity. It extends a vision of reason by questioning a categorical distinction between reason and emotions. In this way Reich questions a Cartesian modernity and so shapes a critical relationship to modernity that resonates with a feminist reclaiming of bodies as an integral part of identity. In different ways they contest the notion of 'the human' as it is framed within an Enlightenment tradition of the rational self. In this way it also goes beyond the Enlightenment tradition of reason, freedom and progress that sustains Hobsbawm's reading of Marx. It accepts that in different ways both Marx and Freud question the terms of an Enlightenment modernity while at the same time remaining partly trapped in it through their commitments to notions of science and progress. In vital ways the critical traditions they articulate remain within the terms of a dominant heterosexual masculinity and the boundaries that it insists on between private and public spheres. Though Freud reclaims sexuality as part of 'the human', so refusing to denigrate it as 'animal', he tends to remain within a heterosexual framework that insists on treating differences in sexual orientation as a sign of pathology.

## **The Women's Movement and Sexual Politics**

The women's movement not only helped to name the power that men could take largely for granted within a patriarchal culture, including in large parts of the Labour movement, but it provided a philosophical critique of an Enlightenment vision of modernity that had been largely shaped through a secularised Christian tradition from which it had imagined itself to be breaking. Within the practices of consciousness-raising there was also a recognition of the importance of truth-telling, and so of women sharing their experience and finding their own voices as they listened to the experiences of others. There was a sense that women could be 'real' with each other, so breaking with established speech conventions in which often women learnt to be silent and defer to established authorities. This resonated with a wider sense of an administered society in which people presented themselves appropriately in language while sustaining a tension between their inner lived experience and the identities they felt obliged to perform for others.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s there was a widespread interest in the family and in Laing's work in relation to anti-psychiatry and the politics of family relations. In his family studies with Aaron Esterson there was an exploration of the ways people could be 'made mad' by the ways they were communicated with in families, and so their experience was invalidated and they were left feeling a sense of *unreality*. There was an attention to language and forms of communication through which children were left in a double-bind: being told, for example that 'no daughter of mine wears lipstick' which could make a young woman feel shamed and even led to question whether her father really was her father. It was through exploring these technologies of invalidation that connections were shaped between Laing's anti-psychiatry writings – though this was a label that he later disavowed – and early feminist insights into the ways that people could be undermined in their sense of self through the *workings of relations of power*. This was contradictory because in some way Laing remained deaf to the workings of gender and considerations of power, while in other ways he was very attuned to the ways that people could feel attacked and undermined in their sense of self-worth through the ways they were being communicated with.

The Dialectics of Liberation Congress that was held at the Roundhouse in May 1967 brought

together different strands of radical thought, including Marcuse's critique in *One-Dimensional Man* of administered life with Stokeley Carmichael writings on the Black Power movement in the United States that was finding its echoes in the UK. There was a sense that people had to be prepared to change themselves and so become part of the revolution they wanted to make. Rather than focus upon questions of state power there was a much wider critique of institutions and relationships within capitalist societies. There was a recognition, partly inspired by the early translations of Foucault's work *Madness and Civilization* that was arranged by Laing, that mental institutions worked to contain those who somehow could not adapt to the expectations of a capitalist society. There were also critiques circulating of the ways mental institutions were being used in the USSR to silence dissidents who would be regarded as 'irrational' for criticising the Soviet State which insisted that it was organised in the interests of the whole society.

A year later we were influenced as students by the events of 1968 and the critiques of late capitalist consumer societies as 'societies of the spectacle', so engaging with ways that experiences are mediated and people can be left with a feeling of 'unreality' as if they have also somehow lost control over their language. But if practices of consciousness-raising for women – and also for men – sought to reclaim language as a mode of individual expression and so as a way of truth-telling, there was a recognition of the limits of expression if it was framed in individualistic terms. There was an awareness that women and men did not necessarily have access to their own experience and – resonating with Freud's psychoanalytic appreciation of psychoanalysis as a 'talking cure' – a sense that, particularly for men, their experience has been rationalised or intellectualised so that we could more easily *talk about* our experience while we encountered more difficulty when we attempted to share our experience more directly. As men's consciousness-raising groups were to explore, this was partly because men had learnt to treat emotions and feelings as a sign of a lack of self-control and thereby as a threat to their male identities.

Men were expected to control what they said to others, and language was often used as a mode of self-presentation in which there was little expectation that men might want to share what they were 'really feeling' – even if they had any idea of what this might be. But there was a tension with post-structuralisms that became ascendant in the 1970s and that were suspicious of ideas of 'expression' and notions of 'selfhood'. Rather they insisted that it was through language alone that people could articulate their experience and that there was no experience that stood outside or before language. This was part of a discursive turn that tended to be intolerant of notions of inner experience, or insisted in interpreting it as an internalisation of external discourses through which experiences and identities were to be articulated. Though the notion that 'the personal is political' was sustained, it was tacitly given a different reading as it came to mean that what we had taken to be 'personal' was in fact an effect of discourses that were available at a particular time in the culture.

It was only through these discourses that people could come to recognise themselves, even though this made it difficult to explore forms of misrecognition and tensions that were somatically felt between the ways people performed their identities for others and what they might feel themselves. Rather there was a re-privatisation of experience, partly encouraged by the competitive structure of institutions, including universities in which young women sought to make their careers. They would learn to be careful with who they shared more of themselves with, and often there were unresolved tensions between the post-structuralisms they were intellectually committed too and the issues they were dealing with in their personal and emotional lives. They would sometimes be dismissive of the emotional, readily trivialising it as 'touchy-feely' while at the same time learning to contain the anxieties they lived with lest they leak to others.

I had come to Marx though an earlier reading that questioned traditions of orthodox Marxism

as a form of economic determinism and sought to re-imagine relationships between Hegel and Marx. As students we were concerned with recognising the historical nature of consciousness, so challenging the ahistorical formalism that shaped academic disciplinary boundaries. We were influenced by the early Marx and excited by the insights he offered to think across disciplinary boundaries. At the time we also tended to accept the need he identified in 'On the Jewish Question' to transcend particularistic identities so that we could identify with the universally human. We were concerned to distance ourselves from the families that we had come from and the traumatic histories that they might have carried, and we had absorbed the critique of the bourgeois family and its narrow expectations. We were also influenced by critiques of possessive relationships not only within families but also within intimate relationships. To be possessive was to treat others as property, and we sought to separate ourselves from the notions of possessive individualism that C B MacPherson had helped us identify as features of a capitalist ethic of relationships that also shaped the ways we had learnt to treat our bodies as property at our disposal. We were concerned to question bourgeois notions of freedom that were sedimented in taken-for-granted property relations we sought to name and so expose.

## **Hobsbawm, the CP, Direct Action and Historical Bias**

Yesterday on October 1st 2012 the death of the Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm was announced. In the evening I listened to a programme that was being replayed in his memory when he was interviewed by Simon Schama; and following that a discussion about his work and legacy in *Nightwaves* on Radio 3. It was good to hear his voice explaining to Schama – who had read his work as a student and been influenced by the questions he raised, if not by his commitment to Marxism. This was a conversation across generations and it became clear how Hobsbawm's commitment to the Communist Party was shaped by his adolescent years in Berlin, where he had moved after his childhood in Vienna and the early death of his parents. He recalled that his mother insisted that he should never be ashamed of being Jewish so it was never something that he disavowed. But he was always wary of the mythologies of nationalism and identity politics, so it seems as if his Jewishness was something that he has transcended in the ways Marx had suggested in 'On the Jewish Question'. It was the universalism that seemed to draw him to the Communist Party in Berlin; his life-long commitment, that went beyond 1956 when many of his friends left the party, was partly being explained by the need to struggle against fascism as he had experienced it in the early 1930s when Hitler came to power.

Hobsbaum was on scholarship to Cambridge in 1935, and he was part of a generation that saw commitment to the Communist Party as providing the only defence against fascism. His historical work was not tied to the economic determinism of orthodox Marxism and he was concerned to explore how different spheres of life in any historical conjuncture hang together around the ways that people make their material lives together. His vision stretched beyond the established terms of capitalism and the formation of trade union struggles against capitalist forms of exploitation. But as he explains to Schama he remains a thinker who remained committed to Enlightenment values of reason and historical progress as well as to 18th century ideals of liberty, equality, fraternity and the pursuit of happiness. He tended to interpret Marx's writings within the progressive terms of an Enlightenment rationalism. Sacrifices had to be made for the realisation of historical ideals even if this meant the death of large numbers of people.

When questioned by Sue Lawlie for *Desert Island Discs* he seemed to insist that people did not know what was happening in Soviet Russia, and when they were told did not believe it but tended to treat it as Western propaganda. But at one moment he seemed to say that the losses were somehow justifiable in the name of historical progress and said that many lives were also lost in the Second World War fighting for the ideals of freedom against Nazism, including in the Soviet Union. As he said dead bodies are dead bodies. What was most disturbing was the equanimity with which, according to David Abramovitch whose father was in Communist Party, he seemed to accept the death of so many Jews – the Litvaks originally living in the Pale of Settlement. There were other nationalities that were also murdered in the name of historical progress, and possibly he felt that Jewishness like any particularistic identity would somehow give way within a wider, more universal vision of humanity. He remained wary of identity politics and was committed to a vision of historical progress that would be framed in the universal terms of the European Enlightenment. But this was to give a secular form to Christian notions of universalism and to sustain within a Marxist discourse the disdain for particularistic identities as somehow ‘backward’ and ‘tribal’.

But Hobsbawm also had a wider vision when it came to appreciating the significance of pre-capitalist forms of rebellion even if he tended to frame them as ‘primitive’ in his famous *Primitive Rebels* (1959). His historical consciousness went beyond the terms of working-class organisation and the gradual consolidation of trade unions. As he explains in *Uncommon People: Resistance, Rebellion and Jazz* (The New Press: New York, 1998) the purpose of his early essay ‘The Machine-Breakers’, that was published in 1952 in the first issue of *Past and Present*, was ‘to defend British labour movements against what E.P. Thompson was later to call "the enormous condescension of posterity"; and, one might add, against ideologists of our own times.’ He thought ‘It is perhaps time to reconsider the problem of machine-wrecking in the early industrial history of Britain and other countries’. Historians were still regarding it as ‘pointless’ and ‘frenzied’ and as an ‘overflow of excitement and high spirit’ but, as Hobsbawm seeks to explain, ‘In much of the discussion of machine breaking one can still detect the assumption of nineteenth-century middle-class apologists, that the workers must be taught not to turn their heads against economic truth, however unpalatable; of Fabians and Liberals, that strong-arm methods in labour action are less effective than peaceful negotiation; of both, that the early labour movement did not know what it was doing, but merely reacted, blindly and gropingly, to the pressure of misery, as animals in the laboratory react to electric currents. The conscious view of most students may be summed up as follows: the triumph of mechanisation was inevitable. We can understand and sympathise with the long rearguard action which all but a minority of favoured workers fought against the new system; but we must accept its pointlessness and its inevitable defeat.’ (pp 5-6)

As Hobsbawm insists: ‘The tacit assumptions are wholly debatable. In the conscious views there is obviously a good deal of truth. Both, however, obscure a good deal of history. Thus they make impossible any real study of working-class struggle in the pre-industrial period. Yet a very cursory glance at the labour movement of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century shows how dangerous it is to project the picture of desperate revolt and retreat, so familiar from 1815 to 1848, too far into the past.’ As he recognises, ‘Yet there is really no excuse for overlooking the power of these early movements, at any rate in Britain; and unless we realise that the basis of power lay in machine-wrecking, rioting and the destruction of property in general (or, in modern terms, sabotage and direct action), we shall not make sense of them.’ (p.6) History teaches us that ‘The prevalence of this “collective bargaining by riot” is well attested. Thus – to take merely the West of England textile trades – clothiers complained to Parliament in 1718 and 1724 that weavers “threatened to pull down their houses and burn their work unless they would agree with their terms”.’ (p.7) He also recalls that ‘in the Northumberland coalfield the burning of pit head machinery was part of the great riots of the 1740s, which won the men a sizeable wage-rise.’

Hobsbawm shows the importance of historical sensitivity and the dangers of interpreting the past without recognising the significance of particular conjunctures. As he appreciates, 'To most non-specialists, the term "machine-wrecker" and Luddite are interchangeable. This is only natural, for the outbreaks of 1811-13, and of some years after Waterloo in this period, attracted more public attention than any others, and were believed to require more military force for their suppression. The 12,000 troops deployed against the Luddites greatly exceeded the army which Wellington took into the Peninsula in 1808. Yet one's natural preoccupation with the Luddites tends to confuse the discussion of machine-breaking in general, which begins as a serious phenomenon (if it can be properly said to have a beginning) some time in the 17th century and continues until roughly 1830....In the first place, Luddism, treated as a single phenomenon for administrative purposes, covered several distinct types of machine breaking, which for the most part existed independently of each other, but before and after. In the second place, the rapid defeat of Luddism led to a widespread belief that machine-breaking never succeeded'. (p.6)

## **The New Left and Sexual Politics**

The New Left was framed by those who had left the Communist Party after the Hungarian uprising of 1956, and so the split in the Communist Party's Historians Group. There was a break with Stalinism but a reluctance often to really question the foundations of a Leninist politics and its visions of leadership. At the same time there was an influential movement for 'history from below' that also helped to shape traditions of oral history, which Hobsbawm remained wary of. He seemed more concerned with tracing the forms of working-class struggle and warning of the dangers of easy generalisations that were not grounded in empirical research. He was part of a generation which was open to learning from the methodologies of the social sciences and sought a dialogue with traditional historiographies that were more narrowly empirically based and tended to focus upon politics and forms of governance.

E.P.Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* was a seminal text, though it took time to engage with its gendered assumptions and its lack of concern about women's labour in service. Its vision of a 'history from below' helped to inspire the History Workshop project that contributed to developing oral histories of working-class life. There was also a concern with relationships between history, literature and culture, and the beginnings of Cultural Studies, with the influential writing of Richard Hoggart in *The Uses of Literacy* which drew upon his own experiences of working class life as it traced changes that he had experienced himself and that he set in a wider context of class relationships.

There were also the writings of Raymond Williams in *Culture and Society* and *The Long Revolution* that also helped shape a new left historical and literary imagination. These influences came together in the shaping of the *Mayday Manifesto 1968* that sought to transform the traditional class politics of the Labour Party. But there were also the wider anti-imperialism movements that were organising against the Vietnam War that could draw on resistance to nuclear arms that had been part of CND. It was the Aldermaston Marches that helped to politicise a younger generation and which showed the importance of direct action. We were part of a younger generation who were also to be politicised through the events in Paris in May 1968.

We did not share the same relationships with the Communist Party that had shaped the older

generation of left intellectuals. But many of us involved ourselves in the annual History Workshop conferences which provided a reflective space for activists who wanted to learn from the experiences of the Labour movement as they were being retold and imagined through these oral histories. In some ways there was a tension and critical edge to some of these histories that seemed to question official Communist Party histories, while at the same time acknowledging different forms of grass root militancies critical of official trade union authority and sometimes even shop steward organisations that sought to officially represent workers.

But within History Workshops there were also critical discussions of traditional workerism and a focus on industrial organisations as sites of struggle, as if community struggles and struggles within the domestic sphere were not really significant because they were taking place within the private sphere. It was partly through feminism that the traditional divisions between public and private spheres were being questioned, and so traditions of male militancy that too easily assumed that politics and power were matters of the public sphere alone. Power was imagined to be a feature of the public sphere while the private realm was the sphere of emotions and personal life. The family was still largely imagined as a haven in a heartless world and so as a sphere of life that was bereft of relationships of power. The suffragettes had fought important struggles for suffrage and so for the equal rights of women within the electoral politics. Within the terms of liberal feminism it was assumed that women had equal rights. Justice was a matter of the public sphere because it was tacitly assumed that suffering and oppression was only 'real' if it took place within the public sphere.

I think that there were tensions between a New Left that still saw politics as a matter of the transformation of the public sphere and which still largely accepted distinctions between public and private lives, and the politics of everyday life that were emerging with the Women's Liberation Movement and arguing that 'the personal is political'. But it was also that the women's movement emerged out of a philosophical-political practice of consciousness-raising that shaped its own visions of solidarity through ideas of sisterhood. As Eric Hobsbawm had noted in his essay on 'The Machine Breakers', 'The habit of solidarity, which is the foundation of effective trade unionism, takes time to learn – even where, as in coalmines, it suggests itself naturally. It takes even longer to become part of the unquestioned ethical code of the working class.'(p.9) The ideas of 'sisterhood' that could stretch across differences, including differences of class, 'race', ethnicities, disability and sexuality, suggested that there were different visions of solidarity. It was partly men's control over women's bodies and the idea that marriage gave men rights over the sexuality of women that meant there could by definition be no 'rape' in marriage. It was questions around sexual violence and the widespread practices of domestic violence, which women were speaking up against, that helped to shape traditions of socialist and radical feminism.

## **The Politics of Experience**

There was a range of counter-cultural movements that helped shape the libertarian left politics that emerged out of the student and worker movements of 1968 and the anti-Vietnam war movement. They made a difference to the ways that we read Marx and how we interpreted the relationship between Hegel and Marx. We were critical of notions of possessive individualism and influenced by anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist traditions that valued individual freedom as it was explored and sustained in contradictory relationships within social relations of power and subordination. We

were critical of the bureaucratic ways that the state delivered services in health, welfare and education but sought to transform state institutions as people learnt to take control over different areas of their lives. This was given meaning in the rhetoric of the time – ‘struggling in every area of our lives’.

But this meant that we were aware of our own conditioning within capitalist social relations so the need for self-examination and a critical relationship with our own emotional and family histories. This was the significance of consciousness-raising for women but also for men because it allowed us to question ways we had learnt to intellectualise and rationalise our experience and the inner changes we needed to make if we were to speak truth to power. We had to learn to voice our own experience and so recognise, as Gramsci was to formulate in his *Prison Notebooks* how a ‘common-sense’ that we had learnt to take very much for granted consisted of different layers of historical, social and cultural relations that helped to shape the feelings we had about ourselves, ways we remembered the past and how we framed aspirations for the future. Learning from feminist theory and gay liberation there was an appreciation of the need to contextualise lived experience in relationships not only in terms of individual emotional histories but also within the social and historical relationships of power that we have grown up into. This framed a critical relationship with dominant theories of ‘social construction’ which failed to appreciate the dynamics of inner life and the need to engage with different layers or levels of experience.

While we recognised the centrality of work in people’s lives and so the importance of industrial struggles in factories, which we learnt from the relationships between students and workers in Paris but also in Turin, we were concerned with how different spheres of life hang together in different periods of capitalist development. This means that we were concerned with different institutional settings and the ways they were shaped according to the capitalist logic of possessive individualism. In this we were drawing on socialist traditions that went beyond the narrow economism of orthodox Marxism, so we were ready to engage with Foucault’s work on madness, medicine and prisons. In these areas, as he was to learn himself, institutions were often countered by movements from below that were challenging the disciplinary regimes so often legitimated through discourses within psychiatry, medicine and criminology. Rather than treating subjects as the effects of these discourses, Foucault learnt in the writing of *Discipline and Punish* when he was working with prisoner groups in Paris that there were counter-logics they developed themselves to ensure agency and control of their lives, even while they were institutionally limited.

Bernard Shaw in *The Doctor’s Dilemma* in 1906 had already argued that medical services in Britain at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had reached a stage of lethal absurdity. He argued that it was not reasonable to expect doctors in private medicine to be impartial when confronted by a strong monetary interest. In this way he anticipated challenges to neo-liberalism and would have been scathing about moves to extend privatisation into the National Health Service – an ‘economic efficiency’ leading to cheap incompetence. Shaw felt people had become helplessly dependent on the spurious cures of doctors at the expense of social hygiene and good housing that would form a ‘sanitary blockade’ against many infections. ‘If you cannot have what you believe in,’ Shaw wrote in the preface, ‘you must believe in what you have. When your child is ill or your wife dying,’ when you are confronted by ‘the spectacle of a fellow creature in pain or peril, what you want is comfort, reassurance, something to clutch at, were it but a straw. This the doctor brings you. You have a wildly urgent feeling that something must be done; and the doctor does something. Sometimes what he does kills the patient.’ Since we all come under their influence at some time in our lives, we are tempted to impose on them an infallibility that camouflages their ignorance. ‘Moliere saw through the doctors,’ Shaw wrote, ‘but he had to call them just the same.’ And so did Shaw – though, as Michael Holroyd writes ‘he regarded their illegible prescriptions as little more than paraphernalia of medieval witchcraft.’ (Review Saturday Guardian 14.07.12, p.16)

I still recall stories about the illegibility of doctor's writings growing up in the 1950s. It was part of medical authority we learnt to defer to without asking any questions. I recall being told to be silent when the doctor visited and only to speak if we were asked questions by Dr. Lindenbaum. But it was research into the class relations of health brought together in the Black Report (1980) that resonated with insights of the women's health movement: these insights sought to question usual patriarchal relationships of medical authority to give women a voice in their own treatment, but also to value women's own experience of their bodies as sources of knowledge that were not so easily to be dismissed in positivist terms as 'merely' subjective and anecdotal when contrasted with the objectivity of the doctor's judgements.

The idea that people should be given more control and responsibility over their health was yet another idea that came to be framed in Thatcher's libertarian right vision. It gave her grounds for attacking state institutions through a process of privatization; most famously, affirming the 'right' of people to buy their own council houses gave Thatcher moral and political initiative that the Left found difficult to contest, since many middle-class people did take this right for granted. Years later when Blair's New Labour came to power they proved to be a centralising administration and a political generation that felt it was through setting targets that people could be given more control. Blair was concerned with returning Labour to power and realised that it was through moving to the centre ground of politics and appealing to aspirations of what was called 'middle-England' that this could be secured. But they felt that their position was more precarious even when they were in power, so they were hesitant in taking on vested interests and largely relied upon a deregulated financial sector to provide funds for their investment programmes. In many ways New Labour adapted to the terms set by Thatcherism in its assumption that it was through the private sector that the state sector would be disciplined, so that the ethics of the state sector and notions of the 'public good' that it served were denigrated and a neo-liberal assessment and appraisal culture put in its place.

## **Political Generations**

The politics of New Labour were threatened by the social movements of the early 1970s, and they failed to learn from a politics of experience. They shaped a language of social exclusion as a way of not having to engage with issues of redistribution, and framed a universal language that could talk about governing 'for the many not the few' but found it difficult to engage with differences of gender, 'race' and sexuality. But what proved more effective than we could have imagined was a liberal discourse of rights and non-discrimination that opened up issues of gender, 'race' and sexual equality. This, however, was largely framed within an aspirational culture that focussed upon competition to achieve so that if people were 'left behind' or had failed in some way they were still deemed to be 'losers'; as such, they had only themselves to blame because they were assured that with policies like SureStart intervening early to create what was called 'a level playing field', people from whatever 'background' they came from, were assured 'equality of opportunity' which often meant a chance to become unequal.

Issues around race were vital to the libertarian left politics that were taking shape because 1968 coincided with Enoch Powell's notorious rivers of blood speech. Powell had been largely silent through the decade during which most primary Commonwealth immigration occurred but suddenly became interested in the question in the mid-1960s. Paul Foot in his 1969 *The Rise of Enoch*

*Powell* thought that this was because Powell spotted the electoral potency of the issue in the West Midlands. Though some have argued that – however misjudged – Powell was not a racist, it seems clear that he was, given his insistence that the British-born offspring of new Commonwealth immigrants remain inherently alien (as Foot quotes it, ‘the West Indian or Asian does not by being born in England become an Englishman’), and that British institutions were endangered by people with ‘readily visible differences’. These were essentially racist positions, and as Tom Bower quotes a 1995 Powellism unavailable to Foot: ‘What’s wrong with racism? Racism is the basis of nationality.’ (Review Saturday Guardian 14.07.12, p.10)

Libertarian socialist politics were firmly anti-racist and were concerned with challenging fascism on the streets as it was organised through the National Front. In this way issues of race that had been vital in the Civil Rights Movements in the United States were framed through visions of black consciousness that had influence on the early women’s movement. Sheila Rowbotham explored this in the introduction to *Women’s Consciousness, Man’s World* showing the dialectical process through which women were to define their own individual visions of freedom as part of a movement for social change and transformation. It was not a focus upon state power that had to be captured that framed different groups on the left, but a sense that people themselves had to *live differently* as they became the changes they wanted to see. Through a critical self-reflection people were engaging with institutions of power that shaped their experience and emotional lives in ways they had learnt to take for granted. As we focussed upon the politics of family and the possibilities of living differently in communal settings, so we acknowledged that everyday life and institutions had to be transformed so that people could be sustained in the differences they wanted to make. There was a belief in self-organisation but also an awareness of the needs for organisation that allowed people control over their own lives.

There was an existential emphasis in concerns with living differently in the present, but also a sense of process and so an awareness of the time that it takes and the support people need to make these changes. The idea of *living our politics* meant that we were not engaging with a theoretical critique of capitalism but attempting to challenge the egoism it sustained as well as its possessive vision of relationships. Of course there were many casualties, especially in the use of drugs, but it is still important to learn from these *social experiments* in living differently that in many ways helped transform personal and social relationships over the following decades. This is evident in the appeals to gender, race and sexual equality, but also in the widespread adoption of counselling and therapeutic insights within a postmodern consumer culture. As Erich Fromme was to frame it, we were concerned with ways of being rather than with a narrow materialism that sought happiness through having more. We were concerned with shaping different relationships to nature and so with ecological insights that asked questions about what was enough – how much does a human being need? – and so with an egalitarianism that made us acutely aware of issues of social justice. We recognised that justice was about more than law, and that questions about what it means to live a just life in an unequal and unjust society remained vital, as they do today for young people involved in the Occupy and anti-capitalist social movements.

We were less concerned with single issue campaigns and more with shaping connections between different social movements so that capitalism was to be contested not just as a set of economic structures but as sustaining a neo-liberal ethic of possessive and acquisitive individualism. We recognised that ‘there had to be more to life’ than ‘living in order to work’ and we appreciated the importance of the *quality of relationships* that people could sustain. We thought that people should have aspirations to succeed in the goals that they set themselves but that a New Labour aspirational politics was framed in exclusively materialistic terms. As a generation we knew that people were dying in Vietnam and we had grown up with the threats of a nuclear genocide so that questions of mortality – of life and death – had shaped us as a generation coming to age in the

late 1960s.

This made us ready as a generation to respond to the feminist challenges to an Enlightenment vision of modernity and its idea that life could be controlled through reason alone. We refused to disavow our emotions and feelings; we recognised that often it is love that nourishes life but that in unequal and oppressive societies people are often denied the possibilities of creating deeper relationships with themselves and forms of support that can challenge the loneliness and isolation they often feel. We did not want to live for ourselves alone, but wanted to shape an egalitarian ethics that sustained visions of justice as it sought to uncover forms of social suffering that a globalised neo-liberal capitalism served to legitimate or at least ignore. We acknowledged a need to engage in processes of self-transformation in ways that could make us feel more compassion for the sufferings of others. But crucially we wanted to *do something* to challenge oppressive relations of power, as we sustained relations of support that could nourish us and not leave us drained and empty. Able to think across the personal and the political, we could deepen left critiques of capitalist social relationships and so imagine that ‘another world is possible’ – but also that we could *live differently* as we attempted to shape more equal and just relationships within a planet threatened by global warming.