

Critical Review of the book launch of 'What is Radical Politics Today?'

Held 25th November 2009, Canada House, Trafalgar Square, London, SW1Y 5BJ

Hosts: Catherine Fieschi (Director of Counterpoint, The Think Tank of the British Council; <http://www.counterpoint-online.org/>); Jonathan Pugh (Director, the Spaces of Democracy and the Democracy of Space network; <http://www.spaceofdemocracy.org>); Dan Porter (Marketing Executive, Palgrave Macmillan).

Speakers: Doreen Massey (Open University), Saskia Sassen (Columbia and LSE) and David Chandler (Centre for the Study of Democracy, Westminster).

Clive Gabay

That groups and people on the Left are prone to self-immolation is not a new observation. From the People's Front of Judea and the Judean People's Front, to the recent by-election in Glasgow North-East which saw the Socialist Labour Party pitted against the Scottish Socialist Party, 'The Left' has always been a much more diffuse and plural political field than that term suggests. This is only as it should be – the historical record of labour movements in the 20th Century was one which was too often predicated on the exclusions of sexism, racism and homophobia.

One should expect therefore the question ‘What is Radical Politics Today?’ to be answered with a plurality of voices and perspectives. Indeed, the book of the same name edited by Jonathan Pugh which this debate at Canada House in London was held to launch had this plurality as one of its central concerns; to bring together a range of disparate and disagreeing voices to address a question, which whilst descriptive, inevitably leads us to ask more normatively *where* and *how effective* radical politics is today.

Nonetheless, given the general political leanings of everyone gathered for this launch (that the financial crisis should provide a rich backdrop for invigorated, counter-hegemonic political articulations and movements on the Left), it was rather disheartening to see how quickly the discussion broke down into recriminations.

This was even more disappointing because there was much to what the speakers on the panel said which appeared to unite them, a fact which did not go unnoticed by two of them at least, Doreen Massey and Saskia Sassen. Massey asserted that three issues had been thrown up for radical politics by the recent and ongoing crisis. Firstly, that the narrative had been won by the forces of neo-liberal capital, which have convinced everyone that the problem is too much

government, too high a deficit, and that what we really need are deep spending cuts.

Secondly, Massey argued that we have failed to build a broad international social movement, or set of social forces. Isolated movements, like the Green movement, have failed to reach out to wider social bases, and this needs to happen - we need to find a way to be understood by as many people as possible.

Thirdly, Massey asserted that we need to think internationally, both with regards to the implications of our very localised actions for people and groups in other parts of the world, but also in learning from the radicality of social movements and forces in Latin America, or Asia.

David Chandler's contribution began from what appeared to be a complementary position, although it seemed that he was not intent on drawing this out in his own thinking. Chandler suggested that 'radical politics' is a problem, because it suggests the avoidance of reality and creates a straw figure of a de-located, non-statist, de-centred power which is nowhere but must simultaneously be constrained. Accusing Massey of constructing a narrative that States have no power, Chandler argued that power and politics have *not* been divorced, but that

the problem is that we collectively imagine this to be so, which sees us retreat from politics. We therefore confront the world as individuals, and become more timid for doing so. The impossibility of politics exists because we imagine it to be so, and we therefore fail to construct a collective politics which seeks to address and assert its power with and in the State.

Where this shares a great deal with Massey is in the assertion that we have been atomised and individualised by discourses of self-improvement and neo-liberalist notions of 'choice'. This means that many devote their energies to actions which they think have great social resonance, whilst all the time continuing to reproduce highly localised and marginalising modes of behaviour which actually resonate far beyond their immediate locales. Indeed, it was surprising to hear Chandler accuse Massey of constructing a narrative of de-localised power when her assertion of taking 'responsibility for the local' directly addresses the way in which some contemporary radical politics and movements can be guilty of proliferating the notion that we must un-embed ourselves from local realities in order to achieve the greatest results (which governments are only too glad to perpetuate – see how Gordon Brown continues to assert that the financial crisis was global, that it did not emanate from decisions taken in the UK to de-regulate the financial sector).

Saskia Sassen attempted to highlight the commonality between Massey's and Chandler's positions (as indeed had Massey throughout Chandler's talk!). Sassen pointed out that the critique of radical politics today as a narcissistic enterprise was really a story derived from socio-economically privileged parts of the world, where most people have become consumers, rather than drivers of democracy. Indeed, in most of the world there is still a great deal of what Chandler would identify as 'politics'. Sassen articulated the challenge as being how we can learn from these political struggles for our own individualised societies and environments, where due to globalisation the State's power has been compartmentalised into the executive branch, which has simultaneously therefore become the most powerful yet least open and democratic part of government.

The power of the State has therefore become far from disempowered by globalisation. Indeed, Sassen pointed out how all kinds of government functionaries cooperate with each other in a form of securitised internationalism – on issues like terrorism, immigration or drug enforcement. Given this, Sassen posed the issue of radical politics as being one of how we re-appropriate this internationalism for global justice. It is precisely the struggles of the supposed

powerless to realise their political agency and to make their own history which must be learnt by radical activists in more privileged positions. To be clear, and despite Chandler's continuing assertions to the contrary, this is the theme which united all three speakers.

It was a pity therefore that comments from many in the audience sought to reify the apparent divisions between the panellists; talk of leftist cultural elites and a lack of any sense of what radical politics is trying to achieve. Indeed, this latter comment seemed to bring a broader degree of consensus amongst the panellists, summed up by Jonathan Pugh, chairing, who bemoaned the lack of conviction predominant amongst postgraduates and brought about by the 'post-modern turn'. Whilst this has been problematic, such reticence has arisen from the record of previous radical movements in excluding the voices of the most marginalised and oppressed. No one on the panel was suggesting a big idea' to unite (and probably exclude) people around, but the speed with which we ended up talking about 'clear lines' existing between Left and Right suggests that we must be careful not to entirely sediment these categorisations. Perhaps the most exciting call though came at the end of the event. In his final comments, Pugh reminded us that whilst research which analyses how power works will always be important, now was the time to turn our attention to the study of how power

might be made to work for the interests of the many, rather than the few. In other words, we need to start studying how, in localised and contextualised settings, radical groups might start taking power.

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