

EDITORIAL



Since the late '80s, all those with sympathies on the Left have had to reconsider their position. In the editorial of the last RP, Greg Elliott, from a knowledge of the recent history of Western Marxism, considered the changed situation of marxist philosophy over the twenty years of RP's existence. He expressed opposition to two temptations offered by the present moment: 'purblind fundamentalism' to recover the classic marxist views; and the empty radicalism of philosophical fashion. As another collective member and editor for the issue you have in your hands, I can hardly fail to take up that preoccupation over the present situation for the philosophy of the Left, and to point out how this issue pursues it.

It is sobering to survey the shifting ground of the Left's discourse during the two decades of RP's existence. So many of the terms we could at one time regard pretty much as ours, to deploy and develop as we wished, have fallen to the world-wide movement to the Right. 'Radical', which we took as our own title back in 1972, has been co-opted for acerbic attacks on the complacent structures of Western welfare-capitalism. 'People's' or 'popular' democracy is heard of no more; most often 'democracy' is instead thoughtlessly identified with free-market capitalism. 'National liberation' has lost its association with the struggle for socialism against the domination of Western capitalism: indeed 'nationalism' (ever ambivalent – as Jonathan Rée's article in RP60 reminds us) has resurfaced in an uneasy alliance with the extension of the capitalist market. Even 'revolution', no longer a world-wide historical movement towards socialism, now appears primarily to refer to the joyous or furious outbursts that have unseated centralised communism.

So the Left has now to advance its case in a very uncomfortable space indeed. Some of the expressions we are left with, we feel half embarrassed about: 'party', 'state', 'class'. On others, we experience a persistent difficulty in thinking coherently: 'religion', 'morality', 'justice', 'reason'. But the mixture of intellectual skills and political commitments that join forces in RP has always made it a good place for a debate to carve out the Left's intellectual space. Thus it is that, over the last two years, RP has debated Nietzsche, humanism and values – the last at a full conference in November 1990. What of reason, whose supposed links to truth and reality once made it the proudest term in the firmament of Western thought? As a magazine of philosophy, RP has, in a sense, never ceased to debate with reason and about reason. Yet, challenged at its very roots by post-modernism in various forms, reason must require our most persistent attention. This issue illustrates the many directions that attention has to take.

Exhibit A to support that claim is the debate below on the legitimacy of the Gulf War. It comes from RP's autumn 1991 conference on nations, war and violence. Mike Rustin and Greg Elliott assess the meaning and validity of the theory of the Just War, which was a constant, if unstated, point of reference to legitimise the massive US/UN attack on Iraq.

The Left was confused in the face of the War, the first major international conflict since the collapse of Soviet communism as a world power. The fact that war was to be waged on a one-time covert ally of the West, a régime already known for its brutality and now guilty of an unprovoked extension of its oppressive apparatus, made it impossible to mount a straightforward opposition to the reappearance of armed imperialist intervention. Perhaps, for once, the West was actually doing the right thing for

sound reasons! Elliott's and Rustin's essays consider the key to such legitimacy as could be claimed for the War. They conclude with a measured opposition to it, grounded in the fusion of values with the analysis of the realities of contemporary states. Despite all the challenges of the present conjuncture, reason can still function, it seems, as an oppositional force against the rhetoric of power.

As Exhibit B, I offer Rudi Visker's commentary on Habermas's attempts to sustain against all-comers a non-relativist link between rational dialogue, meaning and truth (or 'validity'). Visker's aim is to broaden the modern rationalist project as Habermas has refined it, in the face of what, for Visker, is Habermas's own exclusiveness. Habermas over-reaches himself in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, when he charges those who explore the inner world of meaning with letting go altogether of reason's hold on truth. Better to show how meaning can be related to validity without either one being reduced to the other.

In Visker's view, to avoid swallowing up meaning in the rules of validity, Habermas needs precisely the kind of 'framework relativism' explored by those he attacks. In particular, Heidegger and Foucault – both roundly condemned by Habermas – suggest an ethic that has a proper and valuable place in a rational dialogue which could be universal without being universalist. Their 'ethic of truth ... is not the experience of a possible common identity (universality from above), but the experience of my own identity ... that can throw a bridge between us (lateral universality)'.

As Exhibit C, I can point you to our continuing debate over realism: the claim that human knowledge is related to an autonomous real world. Some years ago, the appearance of Critical Realism, a fusion of Anglo-Saxon philosophy of science and Habermasian ideas of human emancipation through rationality, changed the ground of debate on the Left. It gave renewed force to the belief in a rational basis for critique of contemporary reality.

In this issue of RP, Wal Suchting attacks Critical Realism in a meticulous exposition of its founding terms. First, he criticises an unexplained conception of the 'powers' of real things, as advanced in Realism to resolve the long-standing problem of securing scientific induction. Beyond that, he opposes Critical Realism's attempt to replace the Althusserian account of science with a foundationalist metaphilosophy. For Suchting, far from correcting a supposed idealism in Althusser, this strategy drives Realism back towards the old idealism: the subject of knowledge 'reflecting' its object. Finally, Suchting finds nothing but obscurity in Realism's distinctions between natural and social sciences, and the consequent claims about the latter's emancipatory status. The entire analysis of stipulating correct methodologies for social analysis is, for Suchting, misconceived.

The Collective was sorry recently to lose the assistance of **John Fauvel**, who had taken over from me as secretary in 1983 and who felt it was time to switch from the many demands of RP and concentrate on his other activities. He had been a hard-working and agreeable colleague with a wry and original view of matters, whom we had relied on for the best part of a decade.

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