

## Exhilarating Times

**Doreen Massey**

Doreen Massey (1944-2016) was one of the few geographers whose work and reputation spanned her discipline and whose influence extended well beyond Geography's borders. In the 45 years following her first publication in 1971, she wrote and edited a number of highly influential books and articles of interest across a whole range of fields, including community education. For example, in her seminal article 'A Global Sense of Place' (1991) she showed how place was always significant and always being reworked through processes of globalization. For her, communities were spaces that were real, lively and contested, and geography was as much about what happened to communities as what was happening in them. In January 2016, in typically generous style, she agreed to write an article for *Concept*. Tragically, she died not long after, and has been celebrated in myriad obituaries. We are delighted, therefore, to reproduce one of her last articles, published in *Soundings* journal, and expounding her distinctively spirited analysis of contemporary politics. She would most certainly have approved of this border crossing, and we are grateful to the journal for permission to do it.

Soundings has been arguing for a long time that Labour should 'take a leap', that it should challenge the dominant terms of debate: that, rather than accepting the established political terrain, it should be marking out distinctive territory of its own. Just before the last election we bemoaned the party's lack of inspiration, arguing that this was a 'moment crying out for some political bravery'.<sup>1</sup> The whole point of the Soundings Manifesto, likewise, has been to argue the political necessity of challenging the currently hegemonic common sense and to establish new ground.<sup>2</sup>

The election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the party may herald the possibility of such a brave leap, and so we welcome it enthusiastically. But, as we also reflected in Issue 59, 'being politically brave is a gamble ... and like any gamble it may not pay off' (p7). We are currently in the choppy waters of precisely such a gamble and it is

engrossing. These are exhilarating times.

There are certainly signs that the terms of the debate are shifting. There are the big things of course, like opposition to austerity, which are fundamental. And there are also small things which may be equally significant: the use of the word kindness; the insistence that the task is to work for victories not just electorally for Labour but emotionally in society as well (a counter to Margaret Thatcher's 'battle for the soul'?). There is the engagement with the weasel word 'aspiration', but the immediate pulling away from the competitive individualism which that usually implies, in the argument for collective endeavour.

Then there was the response to the attack - from those who are on most days routinely misogynist - that there were no women in the 'big' posts. Came the reply from Team Corbyn: 'it's you who thinks these are the big jobs. Most people look to Health and Education'. What a response! Post-hoc rationalisation? Who knows? But it was a brilliant turning of the tables of the debate. Indeed it reflects a wider interest across the left in 'social reproduction', and our longstanding arguments that health and education, as investing, not just 'spending', departments, are central to the construction of a better society and economy.<sup>3</sup>

And there is the simple fact that the words 'capitalism' and 'socialism' are being uttered in the mainstream media. What is going on here can be understood as the putting out of feelers towards a way of expressing what might be elements of a different common sense. It is also something we believe to be of crucial importance: the beginning of the construction of a new political frontier.

Another clear indicator that Corbyn is establishing new terms of debate is the incomprehension and bafflement of the establishment, certainly at the time of writing. Even the supposedly progressive media are finding themselves without a language, or a set of concepts, through which to understand what is going on. They find themselves lost in a political landscape which is in the process of being redrawn.

We are not talking here of already achieved political gains. Far from it. 'Shifting

common sense’, ‘changing the terms of debate’ and ‘shaping a new political terrain’ can only be part of a long and multifaceted political project; and, most importantly, any new common sense must be able to reach out to, and in some way engage, parts of society way beyond the self-described left. But seeds are being sown. There is somehow a feeling of possibility.

### **The specificities of the new terrain**

The landscape within which this political earthquake has happened has as its immediate background the long decline of European social democracy, within the context of hegemonic neoliberalism, about which we have written extensively in these pages and in our Manifesto. The convergence of social-democratic parties with neoliberalism, and the extraordinary thinness of their democratic element, have been much analysed.

This has been figured, especially by mainstream commentators, as the decline of the purchase of party politics (a proposition now possibly being challenged), even as a ‘post-political’ age, the end of interest in politics tout court. Certainly, recent decades have given us little choice between the main parties. Politics has been reduced to technocratic administration and arguments over (relative) detail. There has been little confrontation between contesting political positions. And there has certainly been - as a result of all this - a crisis of representation. This in turn has opened up a space for populism: for the emergence of a different kind of voice - anti-establishment, grassroots, imbued with passion, producing meaningful talk and action. We have seen these eruptions on the right and the left across Europe and indeed in the US. As Sirio Canós from the Podemos London Circle put it at a recent Soundings event, ‘when you suddenly have a party that doesn’t talk to people as if they are stupid, everyone else has to step up their game too’.<sup>4</sup>

This is the context in which we understand the Corbyn phenomenon - as an element in a bigger picture. The neoliberal establishment (or however it is characterised) is undoubtedly still hegemonic. But it is having to engage in a succession of fire-fighting exercises as opposition to its rule breaks through in one place after another. Each of

these eruptions of frustration and discontent, these upwellings from beneath the carapace of neoliberal hegemony, is distinct. Even among the left-wing uprisings within Europe there are differences. In Greece and Spain they took place through the emergence of social movements and parties outside of the hegemonic political structures. And the differences even between these two are marked. In Scotland the discontent came to be articulated in relation to an establishment party (though also beyond it), but around a - contested - nationalism. And so forth. The case of Corbyn is different again - in ways that are encouraging, but which present different challenges.

In this case the new was born within the old social-democratic party itself - a party that those of us on the left have variously seen as the great obstacle in the path to real change; as the necessary but frustrating vehicle to any small change at all; as the only political voice for the labour movement; and as the party which - recognising that the world was changing - called itself 'New' and responded in precisely the wrong way. The Labour Party has been the great 'thing' that had somehow to be dealt with. And now it has somehow given birth to this.

This is a situation that is full of contradictions, but in ways that, in the end, can be turned to our advantage. It means that this new voice comes into the world inheriting all the institutional resources of an established party - even if those structures and processes are often archaic and part precisely of what needs reforming if politics is to be done differently. It means that there is already in place a huge constituency, in one way or another 'signed up' - even if there is within the very same party a quite visceral hostility from the right that wishes to see the experiment fail. It means, as some have it, that the Labour Party itself must be opened up to become a social movement, which is indeed important - but social movements and parties are distinct animals and that distinction must be recognised: this difference, and the nature of relations between parties and movements, will be challenging aspects of the construction of a new more democratic politics (and there is much to study and learn from in this regard in the experiences in Latin America, Greece and Spain).

This new voice also has strong and positive relations with the organised labour movement. The number of unions that backed Corbyn, and the union experience now represented in the shadow cabinet, is a great asset. But here too there are lessons to be learned. Thus, at our event Sirio Canós welcomed the constructive nature of the discussion with Simon Dubbins of Unite, while Simon himself acknowledged the differences of approach that can sometimes cause problems between unions and social movements.<sup>5</sup> Working together takes persistence, patience and much listening - but it can be done.

We also know that enthusiastic support from unions in the UK may be a point of attack by the right (ironic given the aims of the new voting system). But the great hope is that this could again be a moment - and a locus - in which (as in that moment in the 1980s when the new urban left met with the NUM, as so brilliantly dramatised in the recent film *Pride*) the (very) different elements of the left can come together and learn to talk to each other.

The main point, though, is that all these characteristics give this particular UK eruption of the new politics specific characteristics that we must understand and build upon.

### **Some ideas to work with**

It is certain that achieving wider success for this new politics will take work, with each of us making different kinds of contributions (and of course active participation as opposed to commentary alone is essential). For our part, we believe that a journal like *Soundings* - and the network of engaged and thoughtful conversations that take place around it - has a number of ways of contributing. Firstly, it should be a place for the development and exploration of ideas for alternatives. This work was begun with the Manifesto, and will be taken further in a new series that will be inaugurated in the next issue. We hope that in the new political atmosphere there is now a greater appetite for such debate within the Labour Party. Secondly, *Soundings* can continue to play a role in standing back a bit in order the better to understand the wider and deeper dimensions of what is going on. And a third role is to try to bring to the project

the resources of the intellectual labour that has been underway on the left even during all these years of what - in this country - has often seemed like a political desert. There is much to take up here, but two particular things immediately come to mind.

The first is the importance of a move away from any form of determinism (particularly by the economic, or by class) in the construction of political positions. Rather, what we have gradually come to understand is the significance of pretty much every aspect of society, and of daily life, in the forming of political attitudes, moods and constituencies. The critical point here is that political positions are not automatic. They are a product of, and a part of, hegemonic struggles. This understanding grows out of Gramsci, out of the work of Stuart Hall on Thatcherism as a hegemonic project, and out of the thinking of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.<sup>6</sup>

The degree to which New Labour failed to grasp this essential point was astonishing. It recognised that the world was changing, but saw its role as merely to be a passive reflector of those changes. It had no sense that new times meant finding new ways of constructing a democratic and hegemonic politics. Maybe here Labour's history as the party of an already-constituted labour movement proved to be a disadvantage. It had had a constituency that was already made and given - indeed that had given rise to the party. There had therefore been less need actively to intervene and campaign to change the soul of the nation; less need actually to create a political constituency for the values it said it stood for. (This too is an aspect of the specificity of the UK.)

It is this that formed the backcloth to the emergence of what has been termed retail politics, the framing philosophy of which is to give the electorate what it already wants.<sup>7</sup> Hence the endless focus groups and so forth. There is no notion of campaigning to change what the electorate might want, to argue for values, and understandings of the world, that may not be popular now but are what the party (says it) stands for. The result, of course, is that you end up working within the terms of the established hegemony (for this is evidently what the electorate says it wants). With this approach there is no chance at all of countering the currently dominant ways of thinking, no chance at all of challenging the current common sense and beginning to

construct something new. No chance at all of taking a leap, changing the terms of debate.

*Soundings* has always worked within this general framework of understanding. But the financial implosion and its aftermath threw this set of issues into high relief. The crisis of the economic did not produce in the subsequent period any serious fracturing of the dominant ideology or politics. It was recognition of this that provoked us into our project of revisiting the ideas of conjunctural analysis - and subsequently into producing our Manifesto, in which there is a strong focus on the formation and contesting of common sense.

Now, however, with the possibility of a challenge to the prevailing hegemonic terms of debate, there is more work to be done. How, exactly, can we subvert the dominant common sense? What elements of 'good sense' can be drawn out into the political light and be positively built upon? How can the energy and arguments of the emergent politics filter out into, and give confidence to, wider sections of society?

Second, there is the question of what kind of support this is. What kind of social and political forces are at issue here? In this arena too there is much theoretical/ political work that we can draw on.

Jeremy Corbyn is frequently characterised as a conduit, a focus, a canvas upon which a host of different strands have painted their discontents and desires - a lightning rod. This characterisation is correct in many ways. Corbyn has burst into power on a wave of pent-up frustration with the way that neoliberalism systematically hurts the non-rich, and particularly the poor, the sick, and the young. The great strength of this politics is the degree to which it breaks - in both substance and style - with the smooth technocratic Westminster bubble, which has refined a style and a set of policies that is far removed from the vast majority of the population.

There is no doubt that Corbyn's support draws together many flows. It draws together young and old, long histories and new initiatives. It encompasses elements both of the

labour movement and of new social movements. It is definitely not only ‘the young’, as it was initially, rather lazily, labelled. The presence of young people is marked, but so too is the presence of the over-60s (a potentially positive constellation that might help get us beyond the supposed battle between generations). It brings together Generation Rent - priced out of the housing market and let down by the Liberal Democrats over university tuition fees; disillusioned Labour voters coming back to the fold after years in the Blairite wilderness; and people who marched against the war in Iraq only to feel that it had made no difference. Then there are those in ‘the squeezed middle’ who see their standard of living dropping year on year whilst that of the wealthy mushrooms; the environmentalists who see the chance to move climate crisis higher up the actual political agenda; the ballooning precariat who are no longer buying the line that it’s their fault; people who see corporations not paying their tax, and the privileges of the 1% swelling, whilst everyone else pays through ‘austerity’. There is a politics here that speaks to people using food banks, pensioners whose pension is not enough to live on, and victims of social cleansing forced to move away from their homes. And there are more constituencies than this, many of them overlapping.

Among these new constituencies there are also connections with some of the most innovative moments in socialist democracy over the past fifty years: the anti-racism, feminism and peace movements from the 1960s onwards; that great experiment in popular democracy, the metropolitan counties of the urban left and the GLC (Greater London Council); and the contemporary wave of experimental activism, from alter-globalisation to Occupy.

This support is multifarious, possibly inchoate. Can it be given a shape that can channel into a more focused energy, and a coherent - even while open - set of political purposes?

Here it might be possible to draw on some of the ideas of Ernesto Laclau, especially his work on populism.<sup>8</sup> In a moment like this, when there is (or has been) a serious crisis of representation of significant sectors of society, a figure such as Jeremy

Corbyn, who has emerged as the locus of a whole range of pent-up demands, might be characterised as a 'signifier'. (Laclau makes a distinction between empty and floating signifiers, but that need not detain us here.) The point is that he stands for, in some way, that range of diverse demands. In these early moments, neither the full nature of the diversity that has been brought together nor the precise way in which the demands can be related to each other and embodied is at all clear. There are, therefore, political tasks. One of these lies within the political base - what are the different demands? What is the nature of their articulation to each other? Do they have common enemies which might form the basis for exchange and alliance? (And if so what/who are they?) In other words, is there any way in which - without in any way abandoning the particularity of different demands (housing, environment, trade-union rights ...) an identifiable commonality can be found among them - at a higher structural level if you like - that would enable them to form what Laclau and Mouffe would call a chain of equivalence? The question then becomes whether or not the signifier can 'represent' the commonality of these demands; and this is a question of process - a two-way process, and one which is ongoing. Here Corbyn's commitment to democratic engagement and openness, and to doing politics in a different way, as well as his rejection of individual celebrity status, is a real strength. All this will continue to shift the terms of political debate if it is possible to maintain the current combination of confidence and integrity, pithy acuity (cutting through the neoliberal spin), and, crucially, democracy - humility, genuine inclusiveness, and awareness of the need for new ways to democratise politics, all the way through from PMQs to electoral reform to Labour Party structure.

These kinds of tough analytical and political engagement are necessary to the creation of a successful movement. They are essential, too, for the construction of a political frontier. There is a real question in the UK today of exactly how we would characterise this frontier and who/what is 'the enemy'. 'Capitalism' is too general and has little immediate popular purchase, while to focus on, for example, 'housing landlords' is too specific. How about something that captures the dominance of finance and financialisation in our lives and society? If the experience of Podemos is anything to go by, this will be a long-debated issue. They decided on 'la casta' versus

‘el pueblo’. But the identification of a political frontier needs to be a product of a response to the specificity of time and place. This is a task that should be addressed. Recent discussions in the New Economy Organisers Network (NEON) have made some suggestions on this front; and we need to think further about it.

### **The emerging international left**

We have enjoyed many places and moments of hope in recent years - in Latin America, Greece, Spain, Scotland, Turkey, even in some ways with Bernie Sanders in the US - but we have also encountered setbacks. For many of us, Latin America has provided ideas and inspiration, and it still does, but the attacks that progressive governments there have come under, combined with a difficult economic climate, mean that today all are labouring to keep alive the initial fervour. (It is notable that Jeremy Corbyn has been a consistent and solid supporter of this Latin American movement. Indeed openness or not to Latin America is a real guide to the divisions within the Labour Party: and the touchstone is the position on neoliberalism.<sup>9</sup>) Syriza has certainly suffered reverses, and faces hard times ahead, though holding its own in the September election was a significant achievement. Podemos is facing heavy weather in Spain. Nonetheless the viciousness of the response to each of these popular breakthroughs by the hegemonic forces is itself a measure of the potential they carry. The panic of the British establishment in the face of the Scottish insurgence was extraordinary. The financial terrorism against Argentina has been cold-blooded calculation. The brutality of the attempt to annihilate Syriza in Greece was horrifying. There are many ways of persuading us there is no alternative.

But the eruptions will not go away. And the energy around Jeremy Corbyn’s campaign is the latest manifestation. Magma is erupting from beneath the carapace of neoliberalism in place after place. ‘They’ have to be on constant alert to put out all the fires.

Among the most uplifting responses immediately on Corbyn’s victory were the messages of support - from Latin America, from Syriza, from Podemos ... there is a network of ideas and solidarities here. In an extremely interesting article on the

situation in Europe, Podemos Secretary for International Relations Pablo Bustinduy Amador has argued that - in spite of everything - Syriza has succeeded in opening up cracks in the neoliberal front, and that Europe is a crucial space for the confrontation of forces.<sup>10</sup> Spain, he argues, must now, through Podemos, take up the baton. Maybe the UK can now join in. Corbyn and McDonnell have made a number of commitments: first, not to give Cameron a free ride in negotiations, especially in relation to employment rights and TTIP; second, to develop in the UK a left critique of the EU; and third to convene a cross-Europe conference of those who oppose austerity.

So, times may have been hard, and there have been recent defeats as well as victories. But even five years ago most of these European challenges to neoliberalism could not have been imagined. They can now. Maybe there is here the potential fracturing of the ideological and political hegemony of neoliberalism that seemed so absent in the immediate aftermath of the financial crisis.

It may be that Jeremy Corbyn will somehow be hounded out. If he is, and if the party returns to the comfort zone of pale imitation of the Tories - in a context whereby the centre will inevitably move yet further to the right - the Labour Party may well face extinction as any kind of progressive force. We must do everything we can to keep this initiative growing and to play our part in the wider movement that keeps on bubbling up.

Doreen Massey, 25 September 2015

#### Notes

1. Editorial, Soundings 59, Dare to Win, Spring 2015, p4.
2. See Stuart Hall, Doreen Massey and Michael Rustin (eds), *After Neoliberalism: The Kilburn Manifesto*, L&W 2015: [http://www.lwbooks.co.uk/books/archive/after\\_neoliberalism.html](http://www.lwbooks.co.uk/books/archive/after_neoliberalism.html), especially the framing statement and chapters 3 and 11.
3. *After Neoliberalism*, chapter 7.
4. Sirio Canós, 'European alternatives', Soundings 60, Summer 2015, p19. In our next issue we address crises of representation, populism and the relation between movements and parties in a translation of sections from a new book by Íñigo Errejón

and Chantal Mouffe, *Construir pueblo: Hegemonía y radicalización de le democracia* (Icaria, Barcelona 2015).

5. Simon Dubbins, 'European alternatives', p27.

6. For an introduction to Gramsci, see Roger Simon, *Gramsci's Political Thought: An Introduction* (third edition), L&W 2015. For Stuart Hall's writings on Thatcherism see the Marxism Today archive at [www.amielandmelburn.org.uk/collections/mt/index\\_frame.htm](http://www.amielandmelburn.org.uk/collections/mt/index_frame.htm).

For Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe see *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, third edition, Verso 2014.

7. See, for example, the interview with Jon Cruddas in this issue.

8. For an introduction to some of these ideas see David Slater, 'Ernesto Laclau (1935-2014): an appreciation', *Soundings* 58. 9. See Doreen Massey, 'Learning from Latin America', *Soundings* 50, p139.

10. Pablo Bustinduy Amador, 'Grecia: reflexiones después de la batalla', *Publico.es*: [www.blogs.publico.es/dominiopublico/14481/](http://www.blogs.publico.es/dominiopublico/14481/).