

## **An Interview with John Loxley**

**Q:** You grew up in a relatively large working-class family in industrial England, in Sheffield. What was your earliest exposure to radical politics?

**A:** My political awakening happened in a series of stages. It started with an awareness of worker involvement in re-planning the City of Sheffield, especially slum clearance and housing development. At a young age, I was aware of strong rejection, nationally, of conservative policies and worker involvement in Labour. My family was an active participant in the annual Labour sports day at a former stately home, bought by the union movement. Culturally, I became more aware of class differences after the age of 11 when I started schooling as a 'scholarship' boy at a publicly funded, but elite, school, two bus rides away. Most of the kids spoke a different kind of English and even their uniforms, designed, supposedly, to equalize students, were of a higher quality. It was there I learned to appreciate what the colonial liberation struggle was all about and had my first exposure to Economics. At University, in Leeds, which at that time had quite a radical Economics Department, I had a gradual awakening, starting with the Cuban missile crisis. But it was in Africa that I discovered radical politics and what social and economic transformation is all about. I was privileged to be part of both the Tanzanian and Mozambiquan attempts to build socialism and remember, quite clearly, my trepidation when a series of reforms I'd proposed to the banking system was actually accepted and implemented. It's a very humbling experience that makes you think carefully before you write.

**Q:** Feminist historian and critic Carolynn Steedman, who grew up in Lancashire around the same time you did, has written that school lunches and other state welfare programs gave her a sense of her human worth as a child. Do you think that captures some of your own experience? How did the post-war Labour governments in Britain affect the course of your early life?

**A:** The public housing estate where I grew up was new and was a product of worker control of the city council. We had good public housing, free school milk, baby powder, cod liver oil, orange juice, health and maternity care, etc. These were vitally important to my family of 13. The Labour government introduced free university education, the city provided me with a grant that covered all my books and a living allowance. Without any of this I might never have survived, let alone have had a good education. The one thing we did not use was free school lunches as there was a stigma attached to your name being called out in front of the class. Only after my father died did my youngest brother take advantage of these.

**Q:** Who were your main intellectual influences at university?

A: My main influences were: Walter Newlyn, an anti-colonialist left development and monetary economist; A.J. Brown, advisor to Labour governments; Ron Bellamy, a communist theorist of the Soviet Economy; Professor Beresford, an economic historian who re-discovered lost villages in England; Professor Hilmann, who introduced me to the instability of the capitalist macro-economy; George Rainey, industrial organization; and my personal tutor, Roy Wilkinson, also a working class boy.

Q: Contributions to this volume of essays in your honour are truly international, even internationalist. Your life has been lived on three continents and your politics have engaged with many countries. Would you call yourself an internationalist? Is the left's embrace of internationalism a thing of the past, gone with the collapse of communism?

A: I still consider myself an internationalist and I still believe that social and economic transformation will require, at some point, an internationalist agenda and international cooperation among left movements. The collapse of communism has been a two-edged sword from that point of view. It demolished a whole network of international organizations, but these had become largely fossilized in a Stalinist version of socialism that was largely irrelevant in our society. We need to create new forms and structures of international cooperation.

Q: You are someone who, as a husband and father, has encountered racism—your children are mixed-race. You have actively campaigned against apartheid, and worked with people of all ethnic and racial backgrounds. How has this heightened awareness of racism shaped your politics?

A: I like to believe that my politics are inclusive, encompassing people regardless of age, race, gender, sexual preference and level of ability. Colonial and minority rule regimes were deeply racist and, in a sense, an easy target for international resistance, relatively speaking. But racism is more deeply ingrained than that and, I believe, is a real problem in our society. People of colour suffer real, institutionalized, barriers to equality and, as Winnipeg's Black and Aboriginal communities will testify, these are very difficult to break down. The Gulf War and its aftermath have served only to heighten racial prejudice in Europe and North America. My eldest son has been a victim of this in London, England. I am deeply disturbed by this and believe anti-racism must be a central part of our politics.

Q: Could you explain radical pragmatism? Would you describe yourself as a radical pragmatist?

A: I like to believe my politics are radical. I do believe that an alternative, more cooperative, peaceful and tolerant society is possible and I am anxious to help build it. My experiences in Africa, and in government here in Manitoba, make me

willing to help introduce the kind of radical institutional change such a society would require. In the meantime, we must challenge many of the received wisdoms of our society and change our value system. This will mean, for instance, pushing, at all points for non-commodified ways of running society, for greater worker input and control over decision making, for less income inequality, shorter work weeks, greater protection and encouragement of children, less consumption, more quiet time, and a non-aggressive foreign policy. I see these changes as being a form of structural reform but 'radical pragmatism' covers it well too.

Q: You have recently been elected a member of the Royal Society of Canada. The University of Manitoba has described your contribution to economics in this way:

"John Loxley is perhaps Canada's leading critical economist who has spent his career critiquing the impact of orthodox economic policies and institutions on the poor in developing countries and in Canada, and developing alternative proposals for more equitable economic approaches."

How would you distinguish your methodological, theoretical, institutional and empirical outlook from orthodox economists-are there similarities?

A: In my approach to economics, social class plays a prominent role, as opposed to the orthodox abstractions of 'capital' and 'labour'; I see markets as social constructs that are shaped to benefit certain classes; the state plays a central role and hence the political nature of the state is important to me; I view our economic system as being inherently unstable and am interested in its dynamics; the distributional aspects of allocative (efficiency) decisions are crucial, not peripheral and dealing with inequality of all kinds, including racial and gender inequality, are cornerstones of my approach to economics. If I think orthodox tools are helpful, I'll use them and I have the same attitude to quantitative technique.

Q: Why do you think you chose Africa, Community Economic Development (CED), and the Aboriginal community of Canada as the foci of your analysis and activism?

A: Africa, because so much of what I have learned I learned there, and because Africa continues to be an exploited victim of a highly inequitable world system. Aboriginal people because they share so much with Africa in terms of historical experience but as minorities in their own land face much tougher and possibly fewer alternatives. CED is one of those alternatives offering, potentially, a more democratic economic way forward.