The college making space for socialism in university life

There is often no time for today’s law students to engage with socialist ideas during the course of their studies. Timetables are packed with modules on company law and intellectual property. Outside the classroom many students are preoccupied with thinking about training contracts, bar exams, and entering the world of work.

The School of Law at Birkbeck, University of London, is different from many law schools and faculties because of its commitment to social justice and wider relationships between law and society, politics and culture. Established in 1992, the School of Law at Birkbeck was created to produce graduates who not only have knowledge of the relevant skills, rules and principles of law, but are equally aware of the social, political, economic, philosophical and ideological aspects of the legal art.

The School of Law’s activities and ambitions embody the ethos of Birkbeck, which was established in 1823 to provide educational opportunities for working people. Since those early days, when it was known as the London Mechanics’ Institute, Birkbeck has been London’s only specialist provider of evening higher education, providing opportunities for non-traditional students wanting to combine work and study.

Birkbeck’s School of Law is proud of its long-standing history of debating socialist thought, and its close links with the Haldane Society. Michael Mansfield QC, President of the Haldane Society, was appointed as a Visiting Professor at the School earlier this year. The School’s staff includes human rights barrister Professor Bill Bowring (Haldane’s International Secretary). Sessional lecturers have included the barristers Anna Morris (Haldane’s Vice-Chair) and Siobhan Lloyd (member of Haldane’s Executive Committee).

Public events often focus on human rights, freedom and solidarity. The legal aspects of the civil rights movement in the USA and the murder of Stephen Lawrence were explored by the renowned US academic and political activist Angela Davis at the School of Law’s annual law lecture, entitled ‘Freedom is a constant struggle: closures and continuities’, in 2013. She also spoke about the role of women domestic workers in Black resistance in the USA, Palestinian struggles, the labour movement, prison abolition and respect for the environment.

Birkbeck students discussed putting socialist principles into practice with senior members of the Haldane Society, including Imran Khan and Frances Webber (Haldane Vice-Presidents), and others during a weekend, entitled ‘Radical lawyering – theory and practice’, at Cumberland Lodge in 2013.

Other events have included ‘Law on Trial’ from 16th to 20th June 2014 – a week of free public events organised by the School of Law. The theme for this year’s evening events was scientific evidence. As part of the sessions, panellists interrogated the way in which the State evades accountability for its violence through its selective exclusion and validation of scientific evidence in deaths in custody and protest cases; and the use of new technologies in relation to policing, security and migration.

Human rights and welfare are also centre stage in the School’s new intensive Law Master’s courses, which are taught during concentrated periods of face-to-face teaching. This involves teaching during two weeks in April and two weeks in June/July. These Master’s degrees build on the School’s unique interdisciplinary and critical approach to legal studies.

Guy Collender
Guy is Communications Manager at Birkbeck, University of London.

For more information visit www.bbk.ac.uk/lawontrial and www.bbk.ac.uk/law/intensives.

July

10: Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe, apologised to the family of Ms Cherry Groce for police failings which led to her being shot during a raid. The shooting of Ms Groce triggered the 1985 Brixton riots. She died 26 years later of kidney failure directly linked to the gunshot wound. The jury at her inquest identified serious failings by the police.

15: The High Court struck down a new residence test to restrict eligibility for legal aid as unlawful and discriminatory. The draft regulations which included the new residency test can no longer be enacted by means of secondary legislation and it is not legitimate to discriminate against non-residents on the sole ground of saving costs.

August

5: The prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, Mrs Fatou Bensouda, received Mr Riad al-Malki, the Foreign Minister of Palestine, in The Hague. Mr Riad al-Malki requested the meeting to express concerns about the recent conflict in Gaza and to request clarifications on the mechanisms for a State to accept jurisdiction of the ICC.

6: Max Schrems, a data privacy campaigner, signed up 25,000 people to a class action lawsuit against Facebook. He alleges that Facebook has breached EU laws by monitoring members’ activity on and off the site and co-operated with Prism, a US surveillance scheme.