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Introducing a new Cif series

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Introducing a new Cif series

If laissez-faire politics is dead, how big a role should the state have? Ten British and German thinkers consider the question

Henning Meyer and Karl-Heinz Spiegel

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Whitehall departments including the Foreign Office. Photograph: Sandy Stockwell/Corbis

With every crisis comes the need for change, and the current financial and economic crisis is no exception to this rule. Even though it will take much more time for a new, remodelled international system to emerge, some striking changes resulting from the current predicament are beginning to emerge.

Probably the biggest transformation so far has been the comeback of the state. All over the world, government action on an unprecedented scale was needed to prevent the financial system from total collapse. And now, at the beginning of a global recession, governments are again taking the initiative and trying to soften the coming economic blows with massive financial stimulus packages.

This comeback came as a surprise to many. Given the relative decline of state influence since the ascendancy of the neo-liberal paradigm, few would have predicted such a

return of the state only a few months ago. But the current crisis has shown that only the state – or systems of democratic governance, to be more precise – has the ability and legitimacy to act effectively in times of turmoil.

So a crucial question arises: What is the state's role in the future? Which functions should it fulfil and which should be left to market forces? Where is the new line between the private and the public? There are many opinions on this question, but the current discussions have an important shortcoming: they suffer from a lack of structure. With this series of articles, we will attempt to frame the debate.

This series is effectively a brainstorm of ten eminent progressive public intellectuals from the UK and Germany. Each author was asked to answer the same question: What future role do you see for the state? The combination of recurring themes and new perspectives brought up by each author provide a fruitful basis for deeper investigation and discussion. This series is certainly not an exhaustive account of all relevant ideas, but we hope to provide a valuable collection of fresh thinking.

Of course, the issue can't be covered comprehensively on a merely British-German basis. But you have to start somewhere. We would therefore like to invite other voices from Europe and beyond to join us in helping to shape the central debate.

This article series is dedicated to the memory of our colleague and friend Professor Detlev Albers, whose untimely death earlier this year deeply saddened us. His contributions to this discussion are dearly missed.

- Look out for contributions from Anatol Lieven, Polly Toynbee, David Marquand, Peter Bofinger, Donald Sassoon, Gesine Schwan, Thomas Meyer, Wolfgang Thierse, Andrew Gamble and Erhard Eppler on Cif over the coming week.

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