Understanding Thatcherism

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A year ago, in an editorial, *New Blackfriars* was complaining that the theological understanding of what Mrs Thatcher had been doing to Britain had 'hardly even begun'.

The complaint could have been generalized. To judge by the standard of the public debate at the 1987 General Election, any in-depth understanding of Thatcherism, despite the decade of evidence on which it could draw, was non-existent. Even now it is still in its infancy. A government which claims to have wrested intellectual supremacy from the left and to be full of ideas, and which is if anything rather pleased with itself when its opponents accuse it of sacrificing something or other on the altar of ideology, has nonetheless provoked no coherent theoretical critique to speak of from its public opponents, hardly anything other than mesmerized horror.

Is it the indisputable authority of seemingly unending power that has reduced the critical mind to silence? Or is Mrs Thatcher perhaps right? Has a philosopher-queen inaugurated a republic in which all the questions of political economy, having been answered, no longer need to be asked?

Hardly. The massive paradoxes of the Thatcher years—their blatancy must partly account for the opposition's bewilderment—demand explanation, and, like any explanation of human affairs, that explanation will of course have a theological dimension. I am not, though, a theologian. Surely, however, the launching of a really satisfactory 'theological critique' of Thatcherism at least partly depends on the opening up of a rather more general discussion of Thatcherism, and what I am offering here is a contritibution to this.

I am not, though, a political philosopher or an economist, either. I am professionally concerned with looking at things from a non-British—as it happens, a German—point of view. That may give its own perspective to my thoughts about the policies of the present British government, and so, I hope, help others to understand better than I do.

1. Paradoxes and Power

I have already spoken of Thatcherism's 'massive paradoxes'. The first and most obvious paradox is that Thatcherism has won three general

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1988.tb07950.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

elections in a row and is if anything more firmly established in power than ever and yet, regarded simply as a doctrine, is devoid of intellectual substance. There is here a formidable political achievement, without parallel in this century, but it is not an achievement that anyone would think of attributing to the intellectual powers of Mrs Thatcher's cabinets. Even in the sphere proper to them they have not shown evidence of long-sightedness either in foreign affairs, in European co-operation and defence, for example, or in domestic matters: on the contrary, the government has been remarkable for its lack of interest in the implications of what it has been doing for the British constitution. Even at the most basic level, it neglects systematically to consider the legacy it is leaving to another government of a different political complexion which may well wish to use parliamentary powers to direct and reorganise local government, or ministerial powers to suppress and control information or interfere with educational institutions, in such a way as to vitiate much of what the present administration has done. The government and the Conservative party do of course have their more or less independent think tanks, but the proposals that emerge from these seem often to concentrate on being polemically radical about minutiae and averse even to formulating broader considerations than those of the accountant. And there have for some time been a number of university philosophers willing to feed the mouth that bites them and give support to the present government, but it is important not to confuse a libertarian critique of Marxist and other authoritarian forms of the state with an argument in favour of Thatcherism.

For the second and perhaps most substantial paradox about this strange -ism is that those who profess it were elected to power having promised to reduce government, while the attempt to execute this promise has led to an unprecedented increase in central government's scope and pretensions. For those who are fortunate enough to be employed taxation has overall increased (unless one is very prosperous indeed), and those who are not so fortunate are subject to an increasing array of government pressures to change their skills, move their homes or join government-organised labour-gangs. The extension of PAYE has turned thousands more employers into unpaid tax-collectors. Thanks to frequent changes of interest rates government's overwhelming financial power is felt in every household, and by an artificial restriction of funds or by the enormously increased use of earmarked grants government-dependent bodies are deprived of autonomy and turned into agencies for the immediate execution of whatever happens to be the current wish of the relevant ministry. Local authorities, universities and broadcasting organizations have all been brought under this financial 'discipline', which is somehow never distinct from policy considerations, i.e. from doing what the government wants. Police authorities have already been,

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1988.tb07950.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

school governors shortly will be, encouraged to put themselves in a direct relationship with their ministry should there be local obstacles to their carrying out central policy. Even the Church of England has been rebuked by the Home Secretary for not doing its bit towards keeping down the crime rate. There is a German word for this process of bringing all the agencies of society into line with government intentions—now more or less transparently avowed in the admission that the current administration is seeking to found an 'enterprise culture', as if founding any kind of culture were a proper task for government—but it is a word familiar to an English audience from another context: *Gleichschaltung*. Had a Labour government abolished Conservative-controlled metropolitan authorities and ILEA we should certainly have been told that a Marxist, or National Socialist, revolution was taking place and that a dictatorship on the East European model was being set up.

It is important not to trivialize this feature of Thatcherism in practice by attributing it to the personality of the Prime Minister, or to her 'style'. It is a political phenomenon of the deepest significance and inseparable, as we shall see, from the concept of individual political and economic freedom which is the basis of the ambition to reduce the role of government. Nor must the analyst be deceived by the prevailing vocabulary into thinking that privatisations, council house sales and so on have anything much to do with freedom or a reduction of social control. Just as the privatised industrial colossus becomes a commodity on the world market-place, so the new council-house owner is enthralled to his building-society, itself increasingly likely to be part of an international financial concern, and in both cases the accountant's 'discipline' takes the place of the bureaucrat's. The people of Britain are free to choose between competing bus-companies on routes that are profitable but unable to travel at all, if they lack a car, on those that are not. They may call themselves owners of their own homes provided they pay more in mortgage repayments, maintenance and their own time and labour than they ever did to rent. We shall be free in future no doubt to arrange our own health insurance, but no one will be allowed to be free of anxiety about their health. The contradiction in Thatcherism between the vocabulary of liberation from government on the one hand, and on the other the reality of increased government activity and a narrowing definition of personal choice is fundamental.

It may of course be that only a particular kind of personality could impose this new contradiction on the British social and political system with such rapidity that it is not inappropriate to speak of a Thatcher revolution. And this is the third paradox. Mrs Thatcher offers us (with no option to refuse it) a revolution. I think that offer is genuine, though the lady on the market stall knows neither the true nature nor the origin of her goods, and might be shocked to think that Thatcherism comes

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1988.tb07950.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

from the same foreign factory as Jacobinism or Leninism. But this offer is combined with an appeal to the Victorian past and with nationalist or Imperialist gestures, with a pretence, that is, of being a *conservative* policy. It will not do to accept these gestures at face value and dismiss Thatcherite conservatism as simply reactionary—that is to overlook the true modernity of the new creed. Equally it is not a significant criticism—though it is an accurate one and one which for polemical purposes it may from time to time be necessary to make—that Mrs Thatcher has got Victorian values wrong, and they weren't like that at all. The contradiction here is between the internationalism that is intrinsic to Thatcherite economic practice and the nationalism which is an essential part of its appeal and self-definition: 'putting *Britain* back on its feet again'. And again it is between an economic and social stance that was occasioned, and even necessitated, by the end of Empire, and a political and military consciousness that ignores the end of Empire entirely. The Thatcherite account of the last forty years of British politics has much to say about domestic economic and welfare policy but nothing about the dissolution of the Imperial order, at home, as well as abroad, in which I believe the immediate origins of Thatcherism lie. The absence of a policy (even an out-and-out backing for the Orange card) in Northern Ireland is highly symptomatic.

Returning to the first of these three paradoxes, it is easy to say that the reason why Mrs Thatcher came to power and stays there is simple. That it is the same as the reason why Thatcherism has needed no significant intellectual content of its own. She needs no political philosophy of her own because in the eyes of the electorate there is no coherent or plausible political philosophy opposing her.

But Thatcherism plainly is something, even if it is not an ideology, and its success is not to be explained simply by the impotence or maladroitness of its political opponents. Something important and different has been happening in British society since 1979, or at any rate since the repudiation of the Clegg awards and their ethos. The Conservative party under Mrs Thatcher have been riding the bow-wave thrown up by a bigger vessel of which however they can give little or no description and from which indeed they avert their gaze. Hegel gives the name of 'the cunning of Reason' to the principle that politicians, even great ones, while pursuing aims limited by—and perhaps only attainable through—their own passions or personalities or deluded understandings, can nonetheless be the instruments of greater processes than they are themselves able to grasp. We shall eventually have to ask how cunning Reason is being in subjecting us to Thatcherism. But first we must look a little more closely at the second paradox.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1988.tb07950.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

2. The State and the Institutions

I do not suppose that the members of Mrs Thatcher's cabinet are much given to reading Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. If they were they might be in a better position to understand the paradox that the more they attempt to reduce government the more they increase its direct interference in the lives of British citizens. Never before in peacetime can ministers, by their personal decisions to use central powers to regulate public spending, interest rates and to a certain extent the sterling exchange rate, have intervened so drastically in the lives of millions of households to cow, harass or punish them with unemployment or the threat of it. The centrally promulgated criminal law, and so also the police force, have been widely deployed in areas they previously touched little if at all: industrial relations, and financial transactions in the City of London. Government's relatively limitless resources of money and influence have been used to prevent publication of information which, rationally or irrationally, ministers wished to suppress, doing this often in ways embarrassingly reminiscent of the totalitarian regimes opposition to which has come to furnish their party with so much of its *raison d'être*. Most clearly of all, the last nine years have seen a sustained assault by the organs of state on all the intermediate social organizations, the autonomous and semi-autonomous institutions, the constitutional checks and balances, that lie between central government and individual citizens, that protect them from direct, and always potentially arbitrary, central interference, that give shape and substance and continuity to their lives, a focus for loyalty and a place of engagement with other citizens that is not simply an extension of the market-place—the fabric of society, in short, or, as Hegel calls it, 'civil society'.

It is principally local government that has been the object of this assault, through a reduction in its resources, the centrally influenced disposition of what remains, and the restriction, through privatisation requirements and the new Education Bill, of its area of competence. Devolution, even in the milder form of the financial autonomy that would be secured by a local purchase or income tax, could not be a deader dodo. But other areas of corporate public life, not under central control, and branded 'vested interests', have felt the chill wind of disapproval that blows from Westminster: notably the trade unions, the BBC, the universities and now even the Church. Most significant, perhaps, has been the attack on the professions: one, that of the stockbroker, has been summarily abolished, lawyers have been told to advertise and compete, teachers to teach according to contract, and it is shortly to be the turn of doctors too. All this is not just a matter of limiting corruption, abuse and gross inefficiency, which in a balanced constitution is a perfectly proper function for central government. The

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case of the professions is significant because it shows that Thatcherism is indeed hostile to the whole range of social institutions that are not part of the state, and not simply to those that exercise quasi-governmental functions. A profession is by definition a corporation that restricts its membership by other than market considerations, and professional standards are standards imposed not by the market but by the opinion of fellow-professionals. You cannot have professional standards without professional restrictive practices and an assault on restrictive practices is an assault on the professional institutions themselves.

The distinction between civil society and the state, so straightforwardly made in *The Philosophy of Right,* is not one of which Thatcherism is aware: it uses the one word 'public' to refer to anything other than the supposed desires of the individual (usually called a 'consumer'). Freedom is the freedom to satisfy those desires and anything other than the market is a restriction of that freedom. Thatcherism is thus able to present its assault on the social fabric as a reduction in public control, as an increase in freedom for the individual and an act of self-sacrifice.

Thatcherism has no theory of the public, social world as a medium in which people exist and which shapes their lives, it has no theory of the constitution, of institutions, or of social, as distinct from economic, behaviour. The organs of central government are simply instruments for putting into practice 'our ideas', and otherwise there exist only consumers, the meeting of whose quantifiable desires is the one task government should set itself. The classic questions of constitutional theory are simply ignored: the distinction between legislature and executive, already under serious threat in Britain for many years, has largely disappeared, as Cabinets have come to be as tightly disciplined as parliamentary majorities and ministerial powers of regulation have increased, and even the distinction from the judiciary is coming into question. The need for restrictions to prevent the abuse of ministerial power is neither admitted nor discussed, nor does Thatcherism allow, either in practice or in theory, for the existence of other parties and the importance, indeed the necessity, that governments should change from time to time. (The British constitution gives such absolute powers to Parliament, from which the only protection is delay, that it is essential that governments should have a limited life if tyranny is to be avoided.) It is perhaps not surprising that Thatcherism shows no interest in electoral reform: it is more remarkable that it ignores both reform of the House of Lords into an effective second chamber restraining the powers of the Commons and the promulgation, in some form, of a Bill of Rights.

That institutions have another function besides providing a service, that they are a source of identity, and not only for their members, is also

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1988.tb07950.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

lost on Thatcherism, which is therefore strangely puzzled about the definition of the British nation. There was a time when to be British was to belong to a nation characterized by certain institutions, to belong to the nation of the bobby, the BBC, the National Health Service, the firewatchers of the Blitz, Anglican vicars, the British Museum, bowler hats and rolled umbrellas, and so on *ad lib.* Because such identity is neither quantifiable nor marketable—quite apart from what has been done to some of these institutions since 1979—it does not register on the Thatcherite consciousness, and in the last election campaign the symbol of British identity for the Conservative party was, together with an emblematic dog like a company mascot, a set of statistics of economic performance. The possibility of being proud of belonging to a nation, a town, a school, a team, a fire brigade, because of what it is, and not simply because of what it does, of wishing to work for its good, for a common good, rather than for individual reward, is no more a Thatcherite concept than 'public service', 'public duty' or 'public responsibility'. It is the evacuation of terms such as these, rather than simply poor pay, which has brought about what is often called a 'loss of morale' in professions such as teaching or nursing.

In the place of the notion of society, of the public world, Thatcherism puts the notion of the market, and in the place of the notion of service to the common good the notion of service—i.e. work—rendered in exchange for payment at the market rate. That rate has to be determined by competition, and by hook or by crook competition has to be introduced into those areas of the national life that were previously regarded—not always, it is true, with any obvious justification—as non-commercial. Yet there is a manifest limit on the power of competition to ensure that a service is adequate to the demands of customers when the service is of a highly complex kind, and that limitation is the size of the market. The fewer suppliers the market can support, the more imperfect will competition be. In these circumstances some regulatory body is needed to ensure that the monopoly, or near-monopoly, suppliers maintain an adequate standard, and the definition of this adequacy will not and cannot be provided by market mechanisms. To that extent Thatcherism cannot succeed in reducing the social fabric to the market-place. What of course it can do, and to a certain extent has already done, is to reassign the regulatory function away from autonomous institutions such as the Council of the Stock Exchange, local education authorities, or the governing bodies of universities and vest it in legislation, given effect by statutory bodies, ministerial *fiat* ('school teachers shall have contracts in the following terms'), or parliamentary commissioners.

British society is thus at once polarized and homogenized. The great institutions that gave it depth and complexity fade away. Instead we have

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on the one hand the undifferentiated mass of individual 'consumers', and on the other hand the legislative and executive power of central government organizing those same masses, but as workers, into employment and unemployment and enforcing its will, in the last analysis, by the power of the police. The prominence of the police in British life has increased greatly since 1979. The forces of social control represented by family life, church authority, professional morality or corporate loyalty have all been losing effectiveness, either because Thatcherism is directly concerned to displace the institutions which were the vehicles of those controls by 'the market' and by legislation (the professions and autonomous corporations), or because, though not consciously hostile, it is unable to insert them into its vision of British national identity (the family and the Church). The record of Thatcherism in respect of the family is surprisingly bad: the reform of family law is given the usual low priority and no attempt is made to shield the family from the forces, which in recent years have of course greatly strengthened, pressing both partners in a marriage to become wage-earners, separately active economic units. The poll tax, the tax which differentiates as little as possible between the units composing the population and which logically requires, for its efficient administration, the introduction of numbered identity cards, is a useful indication of how Thatcherism envisages society. We are approaching the state of early nineteenth-century Russia, as Hegel described it: 'one mass, consisting of serfs, and another, of those who rule', with nothing in between.

Of course Thatcherism believes that, by personal equity plans and home ownership, the entire nation—except for that fraction of it which is being screwed into poverty as an incentive to the rest to do better—can be made middle-class, in something like the sense of fifty or a hundred years ago. But the boom in house prices, which helps create the illusion that everyone who has bought a council house will soon be a millionaire, ensures that, however much incomes increase, enough will always have to be spent on this necessity of life to prevent a significant accumulation of capital in private hands which could form the basis for such a genuinely 'middle' class. We can't all be middle, though we can all be homogenized in and through the race to become so.

As it happens, we have an example of the social structure at which (though on a higher level of affluence and with a far more hectic degree of economic activity) Mrs Thatcher is aiming in the condition of the inhabitants of Prague. Many of them have two homes, share, of course, in the ownership of their national industries, have more money in the bank than most British people and, like the population of other Eastern European countries, are living, if in considerably deprived material circumstances, the middle-class life of fifty years ago. The intermediate

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1988.tb07950.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

social institutions (the church, for instance) are either suppressed or a hollow sham, constitutional issues do not exist, and life is intensely private and devoted to the satisfaction of the consumer's desires, whether through the official or the black economy. In social and political (though not of course economic) terms, Thatcherism rather resembles the socialism it abhors. But with this we touch on the historical position and historical illusions of Thatcherism.

3. The Cunning of Reason

The end of the Empire has been the most traumatic event to befall Britain after 1945 or even 1918—literally so, for the patient is still traumatized, unable to recognize what has happened to him. He seems hypnotically determined to forget, not that all those limbs have been cut off, but rather that he ever had them. Of course there are the occasional waves of nostalgia for the far pavilions but what we do not see is any appreciation of the profound influence of the Empire on *British* society for a good two hundred years, nor of the crisis that its end necessarily meant for *us*. We are the product of those two centuries, and of the historical rupture that has cut us off from them, and we have plunged that fact into total and pathological oblivion.

From the middle of the eighteenth century Britain conducted its relations with the continent of Europe with the left hand—the principal object of its attention lay elsewhere, on the other side, or sides, of the world. And from that same time Britain's own internal development diverged from that of other European states. As the modern sense of nationhood came to be established, Britain found its national identity and purpose not through internal constitutional conflict leading to revolution—the European norm—but through acquiring and running an overseas Empire. After the Seven Years' War—the real first world war—France lost an Empire and Britain gained one, and France had a revolution, and Britain didn't. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the possession of Empire had a stabilising effect on the British political system and a conserving, even embalming, effect on British society. British society had room to move; home politics, even home religious conflict, lacked that last claustrophobic desperation that leads to revolution.

Because Britain could tread the path of reform rather than revolution as it adapted to an industrial economy, it took with it into the new age many of the medieval institutions that elsewhere perished as new nations were born. In 1945 the institutional fabric of Britain presented a quite absurd, Heath Robinsonian, contrast to the rationalized mass-societies of the other warring nations. And we have only to look at the history of religious thought in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1988.tb07950.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

see that the Enlightenment passed England by: though by 1740 it was established in Scotland and threatening England, it then faded away. As the Imperial and industrial adventure gathered momentum the English had other things to think about than critiques, whether of the Bible and theology or of the institutions of the Middle Ages.

Organizing an entire society to run an Empire, or at any rate to live with one, meant changes and new institutions too. And, though not directly connected with the Empire, all sorts of new developments necessary in an increasingly complex and specialised industrial society took on their peculiarly British character in an Imperial atmosphere and were partly influenced by the continuing presence of medieval models: most notably the newly founded public schools and the reformed universities and civil service. It seems unlikely that that great Victorian achievement, the county council, or the new professional organizations, or even the trade unions, would have been granted so great an exemption from central government control had central government not felt that it had wider responsibilities than local home affairs. But the most pervasive influence of the Empire on British national life was that it reinforced, if it did not actually create, a uniquely British phenomenon: what the mid-twentieth century used to call 'the class system'—the endless variations on the fundamental polarity of officers and men: gentlemen and players, church and chapel, the natural party of government and the loyal opposition.

In the thirty years after 1947 the political, economic and military base for this entire structure was dissolved. It ought to have been immediately obvious that structures do not remain standing when their foundations are removed, and that there were some hard times ahead. For various reasons it was not obvious, and Britain's decision in 1945 to collaborate with the forces of mid-twentieth century modernity was not in intention a revolution, or was only a revolution on the cheap. Having just won a war, the British did not wish to give up all that they thought of as making them great, and indeed British. Instead, the peculiarities of their society were to be maintained, but its privileges to be made available to all. The next thirty years were an age of having things both ways, of having an Imperial society without the burden of the Empire, and a modern society without the controls of the modern state. It was as if, having done its bit and laid down its strenuous but conscience-picking Imperial task, Great Britain could now honourably, and comfortably retire

But history knows no pensioners. By the time Mr Foot's closed-shop legislation was on the statute-book the cushion of Empire was gone. The British nation could have avoided putting a price-limit on its welfare state, and could have maintained the principle of doing everything for everybody, if it had also been willing—and able—to maintain an Empire

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1988.tb07950.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

which it could have exploited to pay for its own comfort. For thirty years the illusion was sustained that though the cushion was not there, this need not make any difference. Insistently, however, the voice of reality made itself heard—as inflation. And there was no more room to move: the conflicts all had to be resolved at home. Everything that the Empire had created or sustained was an anachronism by 1979, and when Mrs Thatcher got her one-vote majority of no-confidence in Mr Callaghan the revolution delayed since the middle of the eighteenth century had begun and Britain had started to become a genuinely modern European state at last.

Not, of course, that Mrs Thatcher saw or sees it that way: she certainly does not think of herself as carrying to its logical conclusion, unfettered by Imperial memories, the British people's decision in 1945 to opt for the modern centrally directed form of society, even though that is what she is doing. For her the 'Thatcher revolution' is only a manner of speaking. She is no more aware than the rest of the population of the end of the Empire—but by golly she can act on it. That is the cunning of Reason. Reason—let us call it the logic of history—dictated that the post-1947 illusions had to come to an end and that with the Empire the fruits of Empire had also to wither away. Even without Mrs Thatcher, and without a Conservative victory in 1979, it would still have happened, but it would have been brought about by hyperinflation rather than by government decree. It would have been messier, and some of the victims might have been a bit different. People might have been shot in Downing Street instead of burning themselves to death there or sending suicide notes to the Home Secretary. As it was, Mrs Thatcher took opportunity by the forelock and it has been the Conservative party that has bobbed along on the bow-wave of history, rationalizing British society as Napoleon (frequently invoked in the discussion of the Education Reform Bill) did France, or as his twentieth-century socialist and national-socialist successors (not usually mentioned) did Germany and Russia. The imperialist and reactionary gestures that accompany this process have the function of concealing from the party, and no doubt from the Prime Minister too, the nature of the government's main project. The gestures are calculatedly marginal—defending a few rocks in the South Atlantic, persecuting homosexuals—and do not affect the Government's serious interest. The USA is allowed to invade the Commonwealth state of Grenada. The return to Victorian values does not entail a return to the Victorian restriction of political activity to men.

4. The Real Revolution

Nevertheless, though Thatcherism is putting an end to the ambiguities of the post-war years, seeing that bodies which receive government money

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1988.tb07950.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

are either firmly integrated into the central administrative mechanism or, with their subsidies cut off, thrust out into the market-place, this clarification is not what it seems. For the market-place is no liberal hurly-burly where anything goes and there is not a policeman in sight. The supposedly 'free' market is rigorously controlled. This is done by government legislation against 'restrictive practices', i.e. against that freedom of association through which genuinely non-governmental corporations, such as business cartels or trade unions, come into existence. And it is done, more fundamentally, by government control of the supply and price of money. Conversely, the newly defined and concentrated realm of government administration is not remote from the din of trade and calmly devoted to the rule of law, the preservation of order, and defence of the national interest. Here too, we are told, the disciplines of the market must prevail (except in respect of the restrictive practice that 40% of the votes gives you 100% of the power.) So wherever we look we see both the right hand of government and the left hand of the market—could it be that each really does know what the other is doing?

In the modern, totally mobilised state, all, of both sexes, save the old, the young, and the infirm, are, or ought to be, workers (and ways are always being sought to reduce the number of exceptions). In Marx's sense—that a proletarian is one who lives by selling his labour—we are all proletarians now, down to the last yuppie. We have seen that Thatcherism has no serious intention of recreating a leisured capitalist class living by the work of others. Thatcherism sees the whole function of society as the process by which the labour of the entire population, regarded as an undifferentiated mass of individual workers, is directed to meet the desires of that same population, regarded as an undifferentiated mass of individual consumers. This vision is not fundamentally different from that of the Marxist states, in which however the converse process obtains: consumption is directed to accord with production. Neither vision contains a conception of society as encompassing a plurality of functions, groupings or interests, or of a public, political realm as a place where these different elements are accommodated to each other in a principled and rational way. (There is no way of describing, either in Thatcherist or Marxist terms, a forum such as the public inquiry at which a developer, a residents' association, a conservation group and a planning authority are all represented: for that is neither an extension of the market, nor an extension of the planning agency, but a true expression of the *polis*.) There is no room in the Thatcherist view for any social units larger than the individual, and the individual has his identity only as a unit of consumption or of labour, not as one who shares in the life of any institution—not even of the institutions of government. Because government is thus reduced to the force that either satisfies my

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1988.tb07950.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

needs or directs my work it is indistinguishable for me from the market. The organs of state—legislature, executive, judiciary—are simply part of the market mechanism. They do not , as they did under the Empire, express my feeling of belonging: of being British. They do not represent to me the dignity of free beings living in association under the law—for I am not myself invested with such dignity by the Thatcherist view. The freedom the Thatcherist state protects is the only freedom it knows: the freedom to have what I want, not the freedom to be what I choose: the freedom to have precisely what I want precisely when I want it, not the freedom to associate with others in giving up what I want (e.g. immediate treatment by the Health Service) for the sake of something else that seems to us more important (e.g. accessibility to health care for all). In the Thatcherist view there *is* nothing else, beyond the satisfaction of desires. There is not even identity: government does not express it and individuals do not possess it. Let me explain.

In a socialist society people's labour is cheap; in a consumer society people's labour is expensive. This, however, does not mean that in it people themselves are of worth. As people become more expensive—because they are more educated and their skills represent a greater investment, or because payment in status and security becomes less important than payment in purchasing power, or because work is more valuable when there are more satisfactions that it can buy—so it becomes necessary to ration the use made of them, and account closely for it. Like expensive computing time, people must be used to the full when switched on and be either instantly transferable to another function when one job is completed or else simply switched off. In the language of Thatcherism: people—that is workers—must be flexible, or unemployed. They must not be tied to a place, but prepared to move to follow employment. They must not be tied by time, but prepared to work all hours and days of the week, especially Sundays. It follows that they must not be tied to any particular group of people or community: that they have families, even, is of no *social* significance since it is of no significance in the market, except as distracting from their flexibility. Above all they must expect to retrain, to work to satisfy quite different needs several times in their working life. They are in short to be dismembered, reduced to a series of functions that they exercise in accordance with no principle of continuity of their own choosing but only with the demands of the market. For only in this way can they meet the increasing and changing variety of the desires of the consumers. But who are the consumers? None other than the workers themselves. The assumption behind the demand for flexibility in the workers—which denies them the continuity of a fixed identity—is that as consumers too they will have no fixed or limited desires, not give themselves an identity by voluntarily renouncing any of those desires (e.g. to buy furniture on

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Sundays or to receive forty channels on their TV set) for some more general—and therefore non-marketable—good. In the Thatcherist society we each become a Faust, whose endless and innumerable desires can all be satisfied provided only that he gives up his identity, his soul.

Let me give two examples of this form of Thatcherism in action, the first concerning my own profession. The abolition of academic tenure is an obscure part of the Education Reform Bill which causes little public emotion. Tenure is assumed to be an unjustifiable individual privilege and a shelter for the inefficient (though few are aware that in West Germany, not noted for its inefficiency, all public servants have tenure). But two aspects of abolition make it a revealing measure of where British society is going. First, the terms of the Bill make it clear that government is concerned not so much about sacking idle dons as making provision for the redundancy of academics judged surplus to requirement. The government, through its agencies, is to have power to intervene suddenly and with immediate effect in the affairs of individual universities, by closing or trimming departments for its own reasons, whereas hitherto tenure has prevented that direct moulding of institutions to ministerial wishes. With this tendency of Thatcherism we are already fully familiar. Second, however, remember that being a don is not simply a matter of having acquired certain skills. It is a matter of a continuing accumulation of knowledge and understanding. A research project, in the arts at any rate, is a lifetime affair; and only those who put their whole lives into it get anywhere. The assumption behind tenure is that being an academic is a vocation. The assumption behind abolition is that there are no vocations for anyone any more; society is not composed of people who have lives which they commit in this or that particular way but of functions to be performed only for as long as there is a desire to be satisfied. Lives are uncomfortably distinct and finite things. Like institutions, they are essentially restrictive practices in the otherwise free flow of the market and of government directions. Better to hire not a man, but a measurable quantity of his time and work, and then you can forget about him after you have had what you wanted.

The second example is a graphic illustration of Thatcherism's reduction of humanity from lives to material. It is the case of the Westminster cemeteries sold to a development company hopeful that one day it might get planning permission for them. And why, on Thatcherist principles, should it not? The cause of flexibility requires even the dead to retrain—their modest fixity in time and space, a reminder of the limits on desire, is restrictive of the property market and the efficient use of local government resources, so they must accept direction into new employment as the foundations of office-blocks. What, after all, is a human being when he is not performing a market function? So much matter, so much soap. There is a clear parallel to Thatcherism's

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1988.tb07950.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

mobilisation of the Westminster dead in its willingness to allow the economic exploitation of the unborn, 'foetal material' as they are called, humanity without the inconveniently inflexible vested interests of individual identity.

This is the real revolution: the organization of society in accordance with the principle to which Heidegger gave the name of 'nihilism', the reduction of being to efficient functioning. In Hegel's more political terms: society is made no longer to consist of 'particular people' who have both a fixed role of their own and a notion of how that contributes to the common good; it consists only of 'individuals' and their desires, and the state no longer represents a sense of collective identity but is reduced to a 'system of needs'. This revolution has taken place in Europe and America in various stages over the last two hundred years. In its final, most refined and civilian stage, direction is apparently left in the hands of the market. In fact, however, the central power remains omnipresent, having as its one task the maintenance of 'flexibility' throughout the system. Britain, like a rather gentlemanly sleepwalker, went through all the stages in the thirty to forty years after the end of the Second World War. By little more than a historical accident it fell to the Conservative party to introduce the country in the 1980's to a form of modernity that was by then worldwide. The force that made the step inevitable, whoever was in power, was the force of international competition. The international market was so established that, unprotected by the encircling Empire, Britain could no more resist its demand for flexibility than an ailing steelworks could resist Mr MacGregor. In order to regain power the party of the one nation, of Church and Queen, became the instrument of commercial internationalism. In this contradiction there is perhaps a glimmer of light on the path forward.

5. Saving the Inflexibilities

Thatcherism is by its nature an internationalist creed (as is shown by the Prime Minister moderating her nationalist objections to the Common Agricultural Policy so as not to delay the deregulation of the European market in 1992). But this market internationalism leaves a national central government in an anomalous position, as the least justifiable of restrictive practices. The Thatcher government is in a cleft stick. On the one hand it cannot commit itself to realizing a European community—not just because it cannot commit itself to any institutional ideal which might imply that men and women are citizens, and not merely consumer-workers, but because this particular institution threatens to take away its powers of direction of the British economy. On the other hand it cannot commit itself to a distinctively national stance since this would require a protectionist attitude to the sterling

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exchange rate and to key national—or even nationalized—industries as well aslarger subventions for the standard-bearers of nationhood (such as the foreign service, the British Council, or the external services of the BBC).

Thatcherism's inability to envisage European co-operation as a significant political process—and not simply another step in the expansion towards infinity of the market and its 'discipline'—is a blind spot symmetrical with its blind spot, in internal affairs, for constitutional issues. In both cases that question of national identity arises which, though first posed by Indian independence in 1947, has remained unanswered and unaddressed by all British governments since then. And it may be that two blind spots make an Achilles' heel. Heidegger thought that the power of nihilism could be resisted, though only through giving weight to 'insignificant things'. But things that are insignificant in the infinitely flexible market—things such as nationhood, political liberties, a collective purpose, a sense of morality, tradition or responsibility—are not necessarily insignificant to the voting citizen armed with the power of choosing an alternative to Thatcherism if the political parties will offer him one. Not all the inflexibilities in the market can be eliminated by the *fiat* of the British government, and it is Thatcherism's profoundest weakness that it either thinks that they can or has no way of explaining, let alone of appreciating, the fact that they can't. Some inflexibilities are simply facts of life: however big the market, even were it the size of the world, it would still be finite, the possibility of competition limited, and the need for regulatory intervention inescapable. Some are anyway too big even for Mrs Thatcher to deal with: the necessity, for example, of coming to negotiated agreements with European partners and embodying those agreements in supranational institutions. And some inflexibilities people will, if they are allowed, inflict on themselves, sacrificing material advantage for the sake of a freely chosen character: being the nation that has a health service for all, or that publicly observe Ramadan, or that gives its citizens a constitutional right of access to official information about them, or that requires them to build nuclear bunkers under their homes.

Thatcherism is simply the local British form taken by the global process of the flexibilization of human material; the Thatcher government is simply the local political solvent applied to British society not just by multi-national companies but by the entire multi-national currency and capital markets whose degree of global integration was briefly and embarrassingly glimpsed on Black Monday in 1987. To call the unification of the European market in 1992 the Thatcherization of Europe is a comical *hysteron proteron*: the truth is that Thatcherism was from its beginnings the Europeanization of Britain. The forces of which Lord Cockfield is the transitory agent set out towards their goal a century or more ago, and Mrs Thatcher is but one of the ripples they have pushed before them. Nationalist, even jingoist, gestures are simply devices for concealing from the British nation what is being done to it, loud

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assertions of the opposite of the truth, which is why they so often turn out to be insubstantial or self-contradictory: the government that proclaims the territorial integrity of the United Kingdom signs the Anglo-Irish Agreement; petrol consumption continues to be measured in miles per gallon, but petrol itself is sold by the litre. If Mrs Thatcher does not believe in society, but only in individuals (i.e. consumer-workers), *a fortiori* she does not believe in nations.

It follows that the opposition to Thatcherist nihilism must concentrate first and foremost on constitutional issues and those of national identity. To do otherwise, to accept the primacy of economic over political life, is to sell the pass and to accept a doctrine which is shared equally by Marxism and by Thatcherism because it is for both of them the means for imposing a *political* tyranny. Against the Thatcherist-Marxist consensus that the wishes of central government are to be identified with the wishes of the market there needs to be asserted the political freedom to choose a particular national moral and historical character, the freedom at times to be economically inflexible. It may be that the British people do not want to make that assertion. Maybe they wish to keep their political debate at the level of shadow-boxing between the protagonists of government-directed stagflation and the protagonists of government-directed unemployment. But it will be a sign that Thatcherism is beginning to lose its hold, and that they are no longer willing worshippers of the golden calf and its iron priestess, if they, and the political parties that speak for them, begin to address themselves to the real issues that face Britain today: the (proportional) representation of the people; devolution (the end of the residually imperial relations between the constituent parts of the United Kingdom); reform of the second chamber (and effective limitation of the powers of the first); a Bill of Rights.

The British Constitution as we know it today is essentially a creation of the Imperial period and it could remain unwritten for as long as British society was cushioned and structured and given purpose by the existence of the Empire. With the passing of Empire the British state has degenerated into an untrammelled autocracy in which legislature and executive are virtually identical. The left wing of the Labour party opposed Lord Scarman's Bill of Rights as vehemently as Mrs Thatcher's government and for the same reason: they like things the way they are. We have recently heard Mr Ridley deploying against any amendment by the House of Lords of his Poll Tax legislation the arguments that we used to hear from Mr Foot and Mr Benn: victory in a general election gives a party a 'mandate' to implement everything in its manifesto, and an unelected, and therefore unrepresentative, second chamber has no right to frustrate the will of the people represented by the House of Commons. When 'the people' cease to tolerate the hypocrisies and sophisms of the power-hungry on left and right, and take up instead, like practically every other civilised nation in the world,

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the un-British task of reflecting, in a written constitution, on who they are and how they wish to arrange their lives, the ghost of Empire will have been exorcized at last.

In recent months there have been signs that the hypnotic spell of Thatcherism is waning and that a new and more fundamental debate is beginning, within, between, and outside the political parties. That debate will alter nothing if it does not focus on the constitutional issue which Thatcherism has made critical. A new definition is needed of the public realm and the legitimate public interest, distinct from the desires of individual consumer-workers on the one hand and from the ambitions of the current central government on the other. What is the modern British *polis*? What is the proper dignity, and what are the proper limits, of the state power? About what are the British not prepared to be flexible? How is the new Leviathan to be tamed?

It is no accident that the churches have been prominent in bringing about the present discussion. For two millennia the Church has been the institutional opposition, sometimes overt, sometimes covert, to the claim of Caesar to own his subjects body and soul, and has forbidden—of course, for superficially varying motives—sacrifice to the Emperor, whether Nero, Barbarossa, or Henry VIII. If in Britain the Reformation sold out to Caesarism, it has nonetheless since 1979 been the Church of England that has shown itself more willing to provoke disestablishment than a Catholic Church still pursuing the respectability that eluded it during the Imperial era. Yet theologically speaking, as the abortion issue shows, it ought to be the Catholic Church that has the fullest resources to combat the moral atomism, the belief in the primacy of individual desires, and the readiness to reduce human lives to material, which paved the way for Thatcherism and still give Thatcherism a deeper hold over the British mind than any merely liberal opposition will ever understand. The Catholic Church in Britain has spent much of the last four centuries in direct conflict with the ideology of British central government; it holds that vocation in the form of a lifelong commitment expressed by solemn vows is still possible, and indeed an obligation; the relative social and economic independence of its celibate clergy and religious has enabled them, and could still enable them, to stand as a sign of contradiction to the pretensions both of the state and of the forces of cupidity that the state has unleashed. But as yet British Catholics seem reluctant to earn themselves again that charge of treason which, in periods when a British identity seemed narrowing or ungenerous, was their reward for loyalty to a wider, transnational community of charity. For the present it is the Church of England that is drawing the principal theological lesson from the attempt to understand Thatcherism: that, in the end, only the Rock is inflexible enough.

March 1988

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1988.tb07950.x Published online by Cambridge University Press