Introduction:
Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left

These articles represent an attempt to define the character and significance of the political project of ‘Thatcherism’ and the crisis of the left which it has precipitated. They were written at different times over the decade 1978 to 1988. This conjuncture has a unique and specific character, and has proved to be a historic turning-point in postwar British political and cultural life. The essays have the dubious distinction of having helped to launch the word which has dominated the period – ‘Thatcherism’ – into our political vocabulary. ‘The Great Moving Right Show’, first published in December 1978, was one of the earliest articles to analyse Thatcherism in terms of this historic shift.

Initially conceived as a series of interventions, these articles are of necessity somewhat polemical and were designed to have a cutting edge in relation to other positions in an ongoing debate. But despite their ephemeral nature, they do propose a distinctive ‘reading’ of the period and engage a number of longer-running themes. For these reasons they have seemed worth preserving in a more permanent form. Inevitably, they contain many repetitions and though every effort has been made to cut out the most glaring of these, some have had to be retained for the sake of coherence of argument.

The essays in Part One foreground the analysis of Thatcherism; those in Part Three concentrate on the crisis of the left. This neat arrangement, with its apparently simple chronology, is somewhat deceptive. In fact, the two themes are interrelated throughout – two sides of the same coin. For example, the growing contradictions of Labour governments
of the 1960s and 1970s, the 'crisis of authority' of 1968–72, the onset of recession in the mid-1970s, and the turn towards a Labourist version of 'monetarist realism' not only provide the narrative contexts for the rise of Thatcherism but are shown, analytically, to have formed the terrain on which Thatcherism specifically first grounded itself, the contradictions which it worked to its advantage, the 'enemy within' against which it defined its project. The rising fortunes of Thatcherism were tied to the tail of Labour's fading ones. At the other end of the story, the failure since then of Labour, and of the left more generally, to comprehend what Thatcherism really represents – the decisive break with the postwar consensus, the profound reshaping of social life which it has set in motion – provides the measure of the left's historic incapacity so far to meet the challenge of Thatcherism on equal terms.

The main storylines are therefore 'framed' by a set of wider concerns and histories, which are more directly referenced in the short middle section of the book, entitled 'Questions of Theory'. Thus, Thatcherism's economic strategy is set against the relative decline and comparative 'backwardness' of the British economy and the state. Its restructuring of society is contextualised within certain emergent 'sociological' tendencies which are beginning to be decisive for the next phase of capitalism's development as a global system. Politically, Thatcherism is related to the recomposition and 'fragmentation' of the historic relations of representation between classes and parties; the shifting boundaries between state and civil society, 'public' and 'private'; the emergence of new areas of contestation, new sites of social antagonism, new social movements, and new social subjects and political identities in contemporary society.

Ideologically, Thatcherism is seen as forging new discursive articulations between the liberal discourses of the 'free market' and economic man and the organic conservative themes of tradition, family and nation, respectability, patriarchalism and order. Its reworking of these different repertoires of 'Englishness' constantly reposits both individual subjects and 'the people' as a whole – their needs, experiences, aspirations, pleasures and desires – contesting space in terms of shifting social, sexual and ethnic identities, against the background of a crisis of national identity and culture precipitated by the unresolved psychic trauma of the 'end of empire'. Culturally, the project of Thatcherism is defined as a form of 'regressive modernization' – the attempt to 'educate' and discipline the society into a particularly regressive version of modernity by, paradoxically, dragging it backwards through an equally regressive version of the past.

The narrative offered here often appears to be governed by immediate questions of tactics, strategy and the rhythms of electoral politics.
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In fact, 'politics' is always used with a broader, more expanded, mean-
ing. Power is never merely repressive but, in Foucault's sense, always
productive. The contrast is drawn between the narrow, corporate and
electoralist conception of politics, which largely dominates official
Labour thinking and strategy; and the expanded, multifaceted and
hegemonic conception of politics as a 'war of position' with which
(however instinctively and intuitively) Thatcherism always works.
Politics is understood here in terms of the different modalities of power
(cultural, moral and intellectual, as well as economic and political); the
'play' of power within and between different sites, which is only at
particular moments condensed into 'party' or electoral terms in relation to
the state; the interplay between what Gramsci identified as the 'two
moments' of Machiavelli's Centaur – 'force and consent, authority and
hegemony, violence and civilization'; in short, politics in Gramsci's sense
– as 'the various levels of the relations of force' in society.

The so-called 'overemphasis' on politics and ideology has been one of
the main criticisms levelled at this work over the years. One effect of
this foregrounding is certainly to undercut any claim the essays might
otherwise have had to represent a comprehensive analysis of Thatche-
ism. For instance, they provide no substantive assessment of Thatche-
ism's economic policy, though in fairness they cannot be said to neglect
the economic dimension. I do not give sufficient attention to the issues
of defence and foreign policy, war and peace. Thatcherism has many
other aspects, crucial to any comprehensive account, which these essays
do not address. However, the decision to focus on politics and ideology
was the result of a deliberate strategy; if necessary, to 'bend the stick' in
this direction, in order to make a more general point about the need to
develop a theoretical and political language on the left which rigorously
avoids the temptations to economism, reductionism or teleological forms
of argument.

In very general terms, and with many honourable exceptions, politi-
cal analysis on the left seems pitifully thin, and ideological analysis is, if
anything, in a worse state. As conventionally practised, both lack any
sense of the specificity or real effectiveness of what we might call the politi-
cal and ideological instances in the shaping of contemporary develop-
ments. This is not because the left is stupid but because, in both its
orthodox Marxist and economistic variants, it tends to hold to a very
reductionist conception of politics and ideology where, 'in the last
instance' (whenever that is), both are determined by, and so can be 'read
off' against, some (often ill-defined) notion of 'economic' or 'class'
determination. This now looks less and less like the sign of active and
ongoing theoretical work likely to break new ground and tell us things
we did not already know, and more and more like a confirmation of the
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correctness of what we always, anyway, believed to be true: the product of a sort of self-confirming circularity, theoretical whistling in the wind. It is partly the product of the inherited habits of a low-flying economism masquerading as 'materialism', or the search for some philosophical guarantee that the law of history will, like Minerva's owl, take wing at five minutes to midnight, rescuing us from the vicissitudes of the present. If Thatcherism has done nothing else, it has surely destroyed for good these fatal consolations.

I believe these positions are theoretically untenable and also that they constitute a major blockage to political analysis and strategy on the left. These essays are therefore, for better or worse, predicated on the end of the conventional wisdom that there is a simple, irreversible correspondence between the economic and the political, or that classes, constituted as homogeneous entities at the economic or 'mode of production' level, are ever transposed in their already unified form onto the 'theatre' of political and ideological struggle. They therefore insist that political and ideological questions be addressed in their full specificity, without reduction.

Many critics have read this as tantamount to 'abandoning class analysis'. At one level, the charge seems beside the point. Nothing in these essays suggests that British society or Thatcherism could be analysed without the concept of class. However, the real question is not whether to use 'class', but what the term actually means and what it can – and cannot – deliver. In some quite obvious and undeniable ways, the whole point of Thatcherism is to clear the way for capitalist market solutions, to restore both the prerogatives of ownership and profitability and the political conditions for capital to operate more effectively, and to construct around its imperatives a supportive culture suffused from end to end by its ethos and values. Thatcherism knows no measure of the good life other than 'value for money'. It understands no other compelling force or motive in the definition of civilization than the forces of the 'free market', which it is busy dressing up in the pharisaic cloak of biblical hypocrisy. Of the present New Utilitarians we can say what Marx once remarked of Jeremy Bentham: he 'takes the modern shopkeeper, especially the English shopkeeper, as the normal man. Whatever is useful to this queer normal man, and to his world, is absolutely useful. This yard-measure, then, he applies to past, present and future.' Does anyone seriously doubt that this 'profits' the industrial and business classes of society, whom Thatcherism has now erected into the sacred bearers of 'the enterprise culture', keepers of the moral conscience and guardians, inter alia, of our education system?

On the other hand, the effectivity of Thatcherism has rested precisely on its ability to articulate different social and economic interests within
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this political project. It is therefore a complicated matter to say in any precise sense which class interests are represented by Thatcherism (multinational capital 'lived' through the prism of petty-bourgeois ideology?) since it is precisely class interests which, in the process of their 're-presentation', are being politically and ideologically redefined.

The fact is that a profound reshaping of the classes of contemporary British society is underway at the present time. It is perhaps as far-reaching as that 'remaking' at the turn of the century which created the institutional culture and political agendas of Labour and the labour movement, and set the terms of modern, mass-democratic politics as we know them today. (Bill Schwarz and I discuss the ways in which the conjuncture of the 1880s-1930s was formative for the present moment in 'State and Society, 1880-1930'). This recomposition is transforming the material basis, the occupational boundaries, the gender and ethnic composition, the political cultures and the social imagery of 'class'. It has made even more problematic something which the left should always have been more scrupulous about - the sliding of the word across a range of different, sometimes incompatible, meanings and discursive contexts. Thatcherism is both constituted by, and constitutive of, those changes. The left, however, has not yet really begun to grasp how radically these recompositions are displacing its historic perspectives.

Ralph Miliband, in his critique of 'The New Revisionism', acknowledges in much the same terms as I do here that 'an accelerated process of recomposition' is going on and that class 'recomposition is not in the least synonymous with disappearance.' Nevertheless, he restates his belief that there is no good reason to suppose that 'this recomposed working class is less capable of developing the commitments and "class consciousness" which socialists have always hoped to see emerge'. My view is that this entails a much more careful and evidenced argument than the simple reiteration that, since this is what Marx said and we have thought, it is and will ever be so. The argument would also have to address the failure of the classic scenarios and forms of 'commitment and class-consciousness' to emerge in anything like the predicted manner, not just in the last decade in Britain, but also in much of the twentieth century since the 'proletarian moment' before and after the First World War, and across the industrialized capitalist countries of Western Europe and North America. This failure cannot be attributed to the weaknesses of the Labour and other social democratic parties alone, and it must surely problematize for any materialist analysis the orthodox ways of thinking the relationship between what, for shorthand purposes, we may call 'the economic', 'the political' and 'the ideological'.

In addition, Miliband's unproblematic assignment of the new social
movements to their position in and with the working class and his
dismissive treatment of any conflicts of consciousness, identity and prac-
tice (between, say, being a woman, or a black, worker) as 'a matter of the
greatest importance' but not therefore to be taken as 'an accurate
representation of reality' seems to evade all the really difficult, concrete
questions of strategy and organization which face us in the present
conjuncture. For these and other reasons, what has passed for the
conventional 'class analysis' of politics and ideology is no longer adequate
on its own to explain the precise disposition of social forces or the new
sites of social antagonism which characterize our increasingly divided,
but also our increasingly diversified social world.

This is why the question of Thatcherism and 'the popular', which
cannot be immediately reread either in terms of a simple class model or
in terms of votes or public opinion polls, plays such an important part in
my analysis. Thatcherism's 'populism' signals its unexpected ability to
harness to its project certain popular discontents, to cut across and
between the different divisions in society and to connect with certain
aspects of popular experience. Ideologically, though it has certainly not
totally won the hearts and minds of the majority of ordinary people, it is
clearly not simply an 'external' force, operating on but having no roots
in the internal 'logics' of their thinking and experience. Certain ways of
thinking, feeling and calculating characteristic of Thatcherism have
entered as a material and ideological force into the daily lives of
ordinary people. We underestimate the degree to which Thatcherism has
succeeded in representing itself as 'on the side of the little people against
the big battalions'. Ideologically, it has made itself, to some degree, not
only one of 'Them', but, more disconcertingly, part of 'Us'; it has
aligned itself with 'what some of the people really want', while at the
same time continuing to dominate them through the power bloc.

That Thatcherism is in any serious sense 'popular' or has made any
inroads into popular consciousness is, of course, an idea which is often
resisted — paradoxically, as much by psephologists and poll analysts of a
centrist persuasion as by left critics of 'the new revisionism'. This ques-
tion cannot be settled by simply 'looking at the facts': in the end it is a
matter of political analysis and judgement. But I do not find either the
conception of an eternal and impermeable consciousness of 'the' work-
ing class, nor the underlying scenario of the present conjuncture
implied by it at all convincing. We know that consciousness is contra-
dictory (think of working-class racism) and that these contradictions can
be articulated by quite different political strategies because they have a
material and social basis and are not simply the chimeras of 'false
consciousness'. This means that a politics which depends on 'the' work-
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entirely the revolutionary subject-in-waiting is simply inadequate. It is no longer telling us what we most need to know.

Many of these essays, therefore, have tried to understand in a less mystified way precisely what the specific character of Thatcherism's 'populism' is. ('I discuss the theoretical distinction between a 'populist' and a 'popular' rupture in 'Popular-Democratic vs Authoritarian Populism'). The linkages between Thatcherism's strategic interventions in popular life, the reactionary character of its social project (socially and sexually regressive, patriarchal and racist) and its directive and disciplinary exercise of state power, constitute the contradictory and overdetermined formation for which I coined the term, 'authoritarian populism'. The meaning and genealogy of this concept are discussed in 'Authoritarian Populism: a Reply to Jessop et al."

Many of the concepts which I use to think the 'specificity of the political' in relation to the present crisis I owe to my reading of Gramsci. They flow from Gramsci's sustained polemic against economism and what he called the positive effects of 'the introduction of the concept of distinction into a philosophy of praxis'. I acknowledge some measure of my indebtedness in 'Popular-Democratic vs Authoritarian Populism', in 'Gramsci and Us', and in several other places in the collection. I have deliberately used the Gramscian term 'hegemony' in order to foreclose any falling back on the mechanical notion that Thatcherism is merely another name for the exercise of the same, old, familiar class domination by the same, old, familiar ruling class. 'Hegemony' implies: the struggle to contest and dis-organize an existing political formation; the taking of the 'leading position' (on however minority a basis) over a number of different spheres of society at once - economy, civil society, intellectual and moral life, culture; the conduct of a wide and differentiated type of struggle; the winning of a strategic measure of popular consent; and, thus, the securing of a social authority sufficiently deep to conform society into a new historic project. It should never be mistaken for a finished or settled project. It is always contested, always trying to secure itself, always 'in process'. Thus, I do not argue that Thatcherism is now and will be forever 'hegemonic'. I contrast, not Thatcherism's 'hegemony', but its hegemonic project and strategy, with both the economic-corporatist politics of Labourism and the all-or-nothing, class-against-class scenarios of the 'war of manoeuvre' which still dominate the political imagination of the left.

I also use 'historical bloc' instead of 'ruling class' to suggest Thatcherism's complex and heterogeneous social composition of power and domination. I give much greater weight than orthodox analyses to social contradictions other than those of class, to social forces which do not have a clear class designation and social antagonisms which have a
different history and trajectory within contemporary societies. There is no space to elaborate further on this conceptual apparatus but it is essential to acknowledge its influence and theoretical effects.

The object to which this analysis is addressed is, in part, cultural: and, as Thatcherism has developed and changed over the years, I have come, if anything, to pay greater, not less, attention to its cultural roots and to the cultural terrain. Arenas of contestation which may appear, to a more orthodox or conventional reading, to be 'marginal' to the main question, acquire in the perspective of an analysis of hegemony, an absolute centrality: questions about moral conduct, about gender and sexuality, about race and ethnicity, about ecological and environmental issues, about cultural and national identity. Thatcherism's search for 'the enemies within'; its operations across the different lines of division and identification in social life; its construction of the respectable, patriarchal, entrepreneurial subject with 'his' orthodox tastes, inclinations, preferences, opinions and prejudices as the stable subjective bedrock and guarantee of its purchase on our subjective worlds; its roosting of itself inside a particularly narrow, ethnocentric and exclusivist conception of 'national identity'; and its constant attempts to expel symbolically one sector of society after another from the imaginary community of the nation — these are as central to Thatcherism's hegemonic project as the privatization programme or the assault on local democracy (which is of course often precisely attacked in their name: what else is the 'loony left'?). The left cannot hope to contest the ground of Thatcherism without attending to these cultural questions, without conducting a 'politics' of the subjective moment, of identity, and without a conception of the subjects of its project, those who it is making socialism for and with.

To a significant extent, Thatcherism is about the remaking of common sense: its aim is to become the 'common sense of the age'. Common sense shapes out ordinary, practical, everyday calculation and appears as natural as the air we breathe. It is simply 'taken for granted' in practice and thought, and forms the starting-point (never examined or questioned) from which every conversation begins, the premises on which every television programme is predicated. The hope of every ideology is to naturalize itself out of History into Nature, and thus to become invisible, to operate unconsciously. It is Mrs Thatcher's natural idiom of speech and thought — some would say her only idiom. But common sense, however natural it appears, always has a structure, a set of histories which are traces of the past as well as intimations of a future philosophy. However fragmentary, contradictory and episodic, common sense is, as Gramsci says, 'not without its consequences' since 'it holds together a specific social group, it influences moral conduct and the direction of will'.6
Another criticism often made is that I 'place too much emphasis on the role of ideology in the social process' and assume that Thatcherism has 'an ideological homogeneity in the conception and pursuit of policies which does not exist'. Certainly, Thatcherism is not only an ideological phenomenon. However, questions of ideology and culture play a key role in any analysis from the 'hegemonic' perspective and cannot be regarded as secondary or dependent factors. No social or political force can hope to create a new type of society or raise the masses to a new level of civilization without first becoming the leading cultural force and in that way providing the organizing nucleus of a wide-ranging set of new conceptions. Ideology has its own modality, its own ways of working and its own forms of struggle. These have real effects in society which cannot be reduced to, nor explained as, merely the secondary or reflexive effects of some factor which is primary or more determining. All economic and political processes have ideological 'conditions of existence' and, as Gramsci constantly reminded us, 'popular beliefs ... are themselves material forces'. In several places in this collection (for example, in 'The Culture Gap') I have tried to suggest how damaging has been Labour's failure to establish itself as a leading cultural force in civil society, popular culture and urban life.

The analysis offered here contests the idea that each class has its own, fixed, paradigmatic ideology and that ideological struggle consists of the clash between fully constituted and self-sufficient 'world views'. I adopt instead a discursive conception of ideology – ideology (like language) is conceptualized in terms of the articulation of elements. As Volosinov remarked, the ideological sign is always multi-accentual, and Janus-faced – that is, it can be discursively rearticulated to construct new meanings, connect with different social practices, and position social subjects differently. 'Differently oriented accents intersect in every ideological sign'. As different currents constantly struggle within the same ideological field, what must be studied is the way in which they contest, often around the same idea or concept. The question is, as Gramsci put it, 'how these currents are born, how they are diffused and why in the process of diffusion they fracture along certain lines and in certain directions.' We have seen over the last decade precisely such an intense and prolonged contestation within the same ideological terrain over some of the leading ideas which shape practical consciousness and influence our political practice and allegiances – those of 'freedom', 'choice', 'the people', 'the public good'; and what constitutes, and who can and cannot claim, 'Englishness'. Ideologies therefore matter profoundly because, when they become 'organic' to historical development and to the life of society, they acquire 'a validity which is psychological; they organize human masses and create the terrain on which men [sic] move,
acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc.\(^{11}\)

It follows from this that ideology always consists, internally, of the articulation of different discursive elements; and externally that discursive articulations can position the same individuals or groups differently. Given that disarticulation-rearticulation is the primary form in which ideological transformations are achieved, I do not believe that organic ideologies are logically consistent or homogeneous; just as I do not believe the subjects of ideology are unified and integral 'selves' assigned to one political position. In fact, they are fractured, always 'in process' and 'strangely composite'. It is because Thatcherism knows this that it understands why the ideological terrain of struggle is so crucial. This is why it believes that the conceptions which organize the mass of the people are worth struggling over, and that social subjects can be 'won' to a new conception of themselves and society.

Thus, from 'The Great Moving Right Show' onwards, I have tried to show how Thatcherism articulates and condenses different, often contradictory, discourses within the same ideological formation. It presupposes, not the installation of an already-formed and integral conception of the world, but the process of formation by which 'a multiplicity of dispersed wills, with heterogeneous aims, are welded together'. I do not believe that just anything can be articulated with anything else and, in that sense, I stop short before what is sometimes called a 'fully discursive' position. All discourse has 'conditions of existence' which, although they cannot fix or guarantee particular outcomes, set limits or constraints on the process of articulation itself. Historical formations, which consist of previous but powerfully forged articulations, may not be guaranteed forever in place by some abstract historical law, but they are deeply resistant to change, and do establish lines of tendency and boundaries which give to the fields of politics and ideology the 'open structure' of a formation and not simply the slide into an infinite and neverending plurality.

Nevertheless, ideology does not obey the logic of rational discourse. Nor does it consist of closed systems, although it has 'logics' of its own. Like other symbolic or discursive formations, it is connective across different positions, between apparently dissimilar, sometimes contradictory, ideas. Its 'unity' is always in quotation marks and always complex, a suturing together of elements which have no necessary or eternal 'belongingness'. It is always, in that sense, organized around arbitrary and not natural closures. For this way of conceptualizing the ideological ruptures of our times, I am much indebted to recent debates in post-structuralist theory and the work of Ernesto Laclau, especially *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*.\(^{12}\) However, for reasons too briefly indicated above, I do not always follow to their logical conclusion the exten-
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sion of those arguments he and Chantal Mouffe have made in their challenging and provocative book, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy.13 I am much more in agreement with their reformulations - for example, concerning the relations between discursive and non-discursive elements in their conception of discourse - in a recent reply to criticism from Norman Geras.14

I have spent more time in this brief introduction trying to set out the essential starting-points in my analysis of Thatcherism than I have given to the crisis of the left: but that is because, analytically, the two cannot be separated. I have come to a particular view about at least the elements of a strategy of renewal on the left because I think I understand what constitutes Thatcherism as not simply a worthy opponent of the left, but in some deeper way its nemesis, the force that is capable in this historical moment of unheging it from below. Thus, what I say about the crisis of the left is a sort of mirror-image of what I say about Thatcherism. The only way of genuinely contesting a hegemonic form of politics is to develop a counter-hegemonic strategy. But this cannot, in my view, be done if we go on thinking the same things we have always thought and doing the same things we have always done - only more so, harder, and with more 'conviction'. It means a qualitative change: not the recovery of 'lost ground' but the redefinition, under present conditions, of what the whole project of socialism now means.

My position on the prospects for rethinking and realignment has often been described as 'pessimistic'. And in certain respects it is: not because it is impossible, or utopian, but because the left is not convinced that it cannot continue in the old way. In many of its leading echelons, it does not possess a hegemonic conception of political strategy or a sense of arrival at a historic turning-point. It is good at defending the immensely valuable things it has accomplished. But it is not good at conceiving of itself as a force capable of reshaping society or civilization. Paradoxically, the 'party' of history and change seems paralysed by the movement of history and terrified of change. Orthodoxy is its way of warding off evil spirits and guarding against what Miliband calls 'the sharp dilution of radical commitments'.15 This is a concern we ought to take seriously, but it must not be used as an excuse to postpone the radical re-examination of left conventional wisdom.

Of course, 'rethinking' of a kind is now in progress in Labour Party circles and it would be churlish to predict that nothing new will come of it. But the signs are not propitious. It is held on an extremely tight reign within the party leadership, which has closed itself off from the many currents of thinking and new ideas circulating in that big wide world beyond Walworth Road which the leadership has nervously failed to recruit. It is not structured and organized around any broad political
agenda, which might release intellectual energies in surprising places or capture the public imagination. The one thing which is unlikely to be effective in either the short or the long run is a pragmatic adaptation to Thatcherite ground for the purposes of short term electoral advantage. However, what seems to be at stake here, as Gramsci once remarked, ‘is rotation in governmental office … not the foundation and organization of a new political society and even less a new type of civil society’.  

The rethinking process cannot be engaged at the level of ‘policies’ without first formulating a number of strategic questions. Can Labour create the material conditions for a society which is socially just and individually prosperous, and can it sketch how we are to bear the social costs of the transition to a new economic order which alone can guarantee this goal, without the Thatcherite consequences of gross inequality, unemployment, poverty, regional decline and the destruction of human communities? What now is the conception of ‘the public’, of ‘the social good’, indeed, of ‘society’ to set against Mrs Thatcher’s assertion that ‘there is no “society”, only individuals and their families’? For without such a conception (neither a retreat to the old collectivism nor a whoring after the new individualism) we cannot create the popular will for those levels of public taxation or for the redistribution of wealth, property and power necessary to restore the crumbling fabric of society. What does the commitment to ‘choice’ really mean in terms of the balance between market and planning – and what variety of forms of democratic participation are to be brought concretely to bear against the inevitable drift of Labour towards new corporatist and statist forms of regulation? What do we mean by an expanded and democratized ‘civil society’ which is not simply driven by blind will or coordinated by the vicious vagaries of ‘market forces’? What does ‘diversity’ mean for this new conception of civil society and how are the rights as well as the vulnerabilities of minorities to be protected in such a society. How is our deeply socially and sexually conservative culture to be ‘reeducated’ towards a more open and tolerant moral regime?

The questions are endless – but one thing unifies them all. They are hard, searching, difficult questions. They take us to the root of things – to core values and commitments, to the outer limits of our capacities to reimagine the future. They need to be boldly and starkly outlined, in such a way as to connect with, capture and transform the social imaginary. They are an alternative agenda for ‘modernity’. They cannot be addressed in that tone of bland reassurance so characteristic of contemporary ‘Walworth-Road-speak’ – as if, with a little tinkering here and there, and without disturbing anyone too much, we can stealthily slip unnoticed into the New Age.

When the GLC addressed itself, in a massively popular campaign, to
the question of reducing the fares on public transport and subsidizing cheaper travel through public subsidy, it did so not only in terms of pence in the pocket but also in terms of an alternative vision: a ‘fare’s fair’ society – a conception of all sorts of ordinary people, with different tastes, purposes, destinations, desires (choice, diversity) nevertheless enabled by a system of public intervention in the pricing, provision and consumption of a social need (public good), to enlarge their freedoms to move about the city (social individuals), to see and experience new things, to go into places hitherto barred to them – because they were priced, or culturally defined, beyond their reach – in safety and comfort. The striking reduction in violence on the tubes and buses was not something which could have been administratively ‘planned for’ in this scenario; but it was a consequence positively aimed for, eulogized in the campaign, and achieved. There is a lesson here somewhere for those who have turned their backs so decisively and dismissively on the whole GLC experience to learn. It has to do, in part, with how to construct the social imaginary in ways which enable us to see ourselves transformed in the mirror of politics, and thus to become its ‘new subjects’. But we have only to think of the speed and manifest relief with which Labour took on board the ‘loony left’ slogan to understand the deep resistances to this whole form and conception of popular politics – and not only in the leadership of the party.

In the face of these many resistances to the painful and difficult task of radical renewal, I have tried to show, in an indicative way, that however shocking and ‘scandalous’ it appears, the left has everything to gain from ruthlessly exposing its most cherished shibboleths and sacred taboos to the searching light cast by what Marx called ‘the real movement of history’. Indeed, it is in this sense – and not in the religious expectation that every one of his specific prophecies of the nineteenth century could be true for the end of the twentieth – that Marx remains a significant and revolutionary thinker. In this risk-taking venture I hold – against the odds – to the formula which Gramsci appropriated from Romain Rolland: ‘pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will’. Ralph Miliband has declared this ‘an exceedingly bad slogan for socialists’ because what it really implies, he says, is that ‘defeat is more likely than success ... but that we must nevertheless strive towards it, against all odds, in a mood of resolute despair’. I beg leave to disagree. What it means is that every commitment to the construction of a new political will must be grounded, if it is to be concrete and strategic, in an analysis of the present which is neither ritualistic nor celebratory and which avoids the spurious oscillations of optimism and pessimism, or the triumphalism which so often pass for thought on the traditional left. Ritual and celebration are for the religious. They are for keeping the spirits up; for
consolidating and consoling the faithful; and for anathematizing the heretics. They inhibit advance, while keeping the spirit of sectarian rectitude alive and well. There is no alternative to making anew the 'revolution of our times' or sinking slowly into historical irrelevance. I believe, with Gramsci, that we must first attend 'violently' to things as they are, without illusions or false hopes, if we are to transcend the present.

At least implicitly, this book therefore has a 'project', a strategy if not a programme or set of policies (which always, in my view, follow, and cannot precede a new conception of politics). I have tried (for example in 'The Crisis of Labourism') to analyse the dominant political culture of Labour which constitutes so profound a barrier to this process of renewal. In 'Realignment for What?', I have suggested what any regrouping of forces committed to this project of renewal would be like, and how far this is from a conventional shuffling of the existing forces of the right, centre and left — how deeply it cuts across these conventional and now outdated divisions. In 'The Battle for Socialist Ideas' and 'Learning from Thatcherism', I have addressed the question of how, and over what issues, the ideological struggle could be engaged so as to construct around this project a new social bloc which has learned to live positively with difference and diversity, rather than suppress it. I have in several places criticized the Fabian and statist legacies on the left which have stood for so long in the path of popular mobilization or democratization. In 'The State — Socialism's Old Caretaker', I try to confront some of the dilemmas implicit in the left's shift of emphasis from the state back to the democratization of civil society. In 'The Culture Gap' and elsewhere, I take on the centrality of the questions of culture and the politics of identity. These essays do not add up to a 'programme' which can be enshrined in some policy document or shunted mechanistically through the formal bureaucracies of the left. But I believe they do begin to stake out in very provisional form some of the key questions for what we might call the 'agenda of renewal'.

I offer them within the framework of a simple but radical perspective on this process of renewal on the left — understood in its broadest, not its narrowest sense. Submit everything to the discipline of present reality, to our understanding of the forces which are really shaping and changing our world. As Laclau and Mouffe put it, 'accept in all their radical novelty, the transformations of the world we live in, neither to ignore them nor to distort them in order to make them compatible with outdated schemas'. Start 'from that full insertion in the present — in its struggles, its challenges, its dangers — to interrogate the past and to search within it for the genealogy of the present situation'. And from that starting point, begin to construct a possible alternative scenario, an alternative conception of 'modernity', an alternative future.
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respect at least, far from occupying a different world from that of
Thatcherism, we can only renew the project of the left by precisely occupying
the same world that Thatcherism does, and building from that a
different form of society. As Gramsci said, 'If one applies one's will to
the creation of a new equilibrium among the forces which really exist
and are operative... one still moves on the terrain of effective reality,
but does so in order to dominate and transcend it... What "ought to be"
is therefore concrete; indeed it is the only realistic... interpretation
of reality, it alone is history in the making and philosophy in the making,
it alone is politics'.

Notes

1. See, for example, the critique by Jessop, Bonnett, Bromley and Ling in 'Authori-
tarian Populism, Two Nations and Thatcherism' in New Left Review 147, 1984, and my
reply reprinted in this volume, pp. 150-160.
2. A question posed, for example, by Ellen Meliks Wood in The Retreat from
Class, London 1986, and assumed to be already proven by many other critics.
3. Reprinted from Mary Langan and Bill Schwarz, eds., Crises of the British State
6. A. Gramsci, 'The Study of Philosophy' in Selections from the Prison Notebooks,
8. See, for example, Desmond King in The New Right, London 1987.
10. Ibid., p. 327.
11. Ibid., p. 277.
14. See N. Geras, 'Post-Marxism?', New Left Review 163, 1987; and the response by
18. E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, 'Post-Marxism without Apologies'.
Learning from Thatcherism

'Ten lessons from madame LaZonga;
She does the rhumba, and she does the conga'

The process of 'rethinking' has begun – many would say, not before time. Admittedly, it is taking some peculiar forms – the 'Labour Listens' campaign being one of the most bizarre. Is it really useful to listen to all and sundry about the future of socialism without, at least, first formulating some themes or propositions of your own? Are there no policy directions or tendencies already emerging inside Walworth Road? No matter. Even this muddled exercise should be seen as part of a wider process – painful, contorted, but an absolute prerequisite to any possible renewal of the project of the left.

The issue, now, is not whether but how to rethink. The temptations for the left will be either to fall back on The Faith as we know it or to race forward to embrace the new Thatcherite 'consensus'. Another, more radical, proposal is that we could do worse than to start the process of rethinking with a little thought. What the 'Thatcher revolution' suggests is that good ideas, or what the political commentators were calling, in the aftermath of the election, some 'Big Themes', don't fall off the shelf without an ideological framework to give those ideas coherence. By framework, we mean a perspective on what is happening to society now, a vision of the future, a capacity to articulate these vividly through a few clearly-enunciated themes or principles, a new conception of politics. In short, a political strategy. In this, as in much else, the left could do worse than begin by 'learning from Thatcherism'.

Now, nothing is more calculated to drive the left into a tizzy than this scandalous proposition – especially when advanced by Marxism Today.
The very idea of Thatcherism is anathema to the left. Decent people everywhere hate and revile it. Where Thatcherism is, there the left cannot be. They inhabit two, not only different and hostile, but mutually-exclusive worlds. What on earth could the left possibly learn? Besides, isn’t this slogan simply a cover-up for the attempt to shift Labour irrevocably to the right — an injunction to cuddle up to the ‘enterprise culture’ on the if-you-can’t-beat-them-join-them principle?

It is a sign both of the defensiveness and the residual sectarianism afflicting many parts of the left that it misreads an injunction to analyse ‘Thatcherism’ for a recommendation to swallow it whole. It is time to correct this fatal confusion, most of all because it is now so politically disabling. Unless the left can understand Thatcherism — what it is, why it arose, what its historical specificity is, the reasons for its success in redrawing the political map and disorganizing the left — it cannot renew itself because it cannot understand the world it must live in if it is not to be ‘disappeared’ into permanent marginality. It is time, therefore, in the context of rethinking, to make clear exactly what is meant by ‘learning from Thatcherism’. And we can do this, not only in general terms, but in relation to a concrete example: the current crisis surrounding the NHS.

The first thing Thatcherism teaches us about the NHS is that crises always present opportunities as well as problems. The problem here is not only how to reorganize the NHS but how to turn the crisis to our political advantage. It is not only a chance to defend the NHS but an opportunity to construct a majoritarian politics of the left. If the left cannot develop an alternative long-term political strategy it cannot save the NHS. What most distinguishes Thatcherism’s wide-ranging conduct of ideological politics from Labour’s narrow, tactical parliamentarianism, is exactly this unremitting attention to the long-term, strategic, political ‘payoff’ of apparently short-term crises.

The present uproar around the NHS is, after all, the most protracted crisis affecting the welfare state of Mrs Thatcher’s reign. We always knew — and she always knew — that it was her Achilles heel: the area where popular opinion would be most stubbornly resistant to the project of ‘breaking the spell of the welfare state’. What we have now is a crisis that refuses to go away, unremitting (and often critical) media coverage, widespread and varied popular support for a change, and the government temporarily on the ropes. How could the left and the Labour Party fail to profit, politically, from such a conjuncture?

And yet, the more the crisis unfolds, the more the left’s political and ideological gains seem, at best, ‘passive’ ones. Mrs Thatcher has personally taken charge of the crisis — always an ominous sign. The impression which the prime minister was trying to create was that she was pleased that talk of crisis by the opposition and health professionals had opened
up the NHS to her radicalism. Her spokesman countered the impression of government panic by stressing that she was "seizing the tide of public perception" (The Guardian Jan 27). The talk is now exclusively about 'alternative ways of funding' (which every post-Thatcherite child of nine knows is a code-phrase for the massive expansion of private medicine and privatisation within the NHS) and 'breaking the barriers to greater efficiency' (which we know is a code-phrase for destroying COHSE and NUPE).

Haven't we been here before? A great, thundering crisis - and then, inexorably, as it unfolds, the tide beginning to turn, the ideological advantage shifting to the other side, victory snatched from the jaws of defeat ...? Politics, waged by Thatcherism as a relentless 'war of positions'? Crisis as a God-sent opportunity to radically restructure society (or, as Gramsci put it, 'reconstruction already under way in the very moment of destruction')? Why do we still find it impossible to believe that this could happen, when it has been happening to us, steadily, since 1979?

There are several reasons for this reluctance. The left keeps telling itself that 'the postwar settlement is over': but we still find it difficult to think politically in a world where its terms can no longer be taken for granted. We find it easier to be righteously moralistic about Thatcherism ('isn't she a cow?'): harder to grasp its logic as a political strategy. Another reason is the left's defensiveness. It is as though the moment we stray, even for a moment, from the straight-and-narrow path of conventional left wisdom, the big, bad wolf of Thatcherite revisionism is waiting to gobble us up. Our sectarianism is often a product of fear - the changing world is seen as a strange and threatening place without signposts. It is also symptomatic of the way our thinking has become stuck in a particular historic groove, of how our agendas are fixed by the circumstances (the 1930s, 1945) in which they were originally formed.

It is also due to a certain notion of politics, inherited not so much as a theory, more as a habit of mind. We go on thinking a unilinear and irreversible political logic, driven by some abstract entity we call 'the economic' or 'capital', unfolding to its preordained end. Whereas, as Thatcherism clearly shows, politics actually works more like the logic of language: you can always put it another way if you try hard enough. Current campaigning on cuts in the NHS could lead to a leap in public spending. Alternatively, it could lead to the argument that - since the NHS is underfunded but the demand is potentially limitless, since taxpayers are looking to pay less in taxation and there is money swirling around in the private sector - the only solution is value for money and privatisation. The difference between the first and the second scenarios is not determined by some inexcusable 'law of history' but by the effectiveness...
of our political-ideological intervention, above all in the ‘theatre’ of popular politics and popular conceptions.

Let us stay with the question of ‘popular conceptions’ for a moment. The popular defence of the NHS is genuine. But so is the demand for lower taxation. (In the same way, the commitment to the state education system is widespread. But so is the sense that, in some places, it is beginning to fall apart). These interests genuinely conflict. They collide inside the heads and hearts of many ordinary folk who aren’t one hundred-and-one-per-cent committed ‘Thatcherites’ — people who we will have to win over if the principles underlying the NHS or state education are ever to prevail again in a new form. This conflict of loyalties and desires is what precipitates chaos and unpredictability in the ideological field: precisely the rupture on which Thatcherism capitalises.

So, the balance of ideological advantage slowly turns Thatcherism’s way, because the specific issue of the NHS is secured for the right by a deeper set of articulations which the left has not begun to shift. These include such propositions as: the public sector is bureaucratic and inefficient; the private sector is efficient and gives ‘value for money’; efficiency is inextricably linked with ‘competition’ and ‘market forces’; the ‘dependency culture’ makes growing demands on the state — unless ruthlessly disciplined — a ‘bottomless pit’ (the spectre of the endlessly desiring consumer); public sector institutions, protected by public sector unions, are always ‘overmanned’ (sic); ‘freedom’ would be enhanced by giving the money back to the punters and letting them choose the form and level of health care they want; if there is money to spare, it is the direct result of Thatcherite ‘prosperity’; and so on. In short, the familiar Thatcherite litany which is indelibly imprinted on the public mind and imposed on public and private discourse everywhere.

The unpalatable fact is that, despite the crisis, Thatcherism continues to hold the high ground because, among large sections of the population (including Labour voters), the political ideological thesmatics of Thatcherism remain in place.

So, one thing we can learn from Thatcherism is that, in this day and age, in our kind of society, politics is either conducted ideologically, or not at all. Thatcherism has put in play a range of different social and economic strategies. But it has never for a moment neglected the ideological dimension. Privatization, for example, has many economic and social payoffs. But it is never advanced by Thatcherism without also being constructed ideologically (‘Sid’, the ‘share-owning democracy’ etc). There is no point giving people tax cuts unless you also sell it to them as part of the ‘freedom’ package. In this sense, Thatcherism is always, and consistently, multifaceted. It always moves on several fronts at once. It moulds people’s conceptions as it restructures their lives as it
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This is what is sometimes called a ‘hegemonic political project’. A simpler way of putting it would be thinking and acting strategically. This word is constantly bandied about by the left. But do we know what it means in practice? In his recent pamphlet on The Politics Of Prosperity Charles Leadbeater argued that ‘thinking strategically’ implied
‘recognizing the enormity and significance of the changes which have taken place in the last decade. It must not simply modernize past policies ... There must be some vision of what kind of society this strategy would create ... It must be built up from the foundations of the cultural identities and lifestyles it sanctions and approves ... through the institutional mechanisms which promote and maintain these ... to the higher political ideology.¹

These aspects need to be spelt out more.
The ‘enormity and significance of change’ does not only refer to the consequences of Thatcherite cuts and restructuring. There are deep-seated underlying, economic, sociological and cultural trends which are profoundly reshaping Britain. Thatcherism did not create these, though it appropriates them politically and harnesses them to its own strategies. But any left-of-centre government will have to deal with them too. In that sense, whether we like it or not, we exist in the same universe, and are subject to some of the same conditions of existence. This is not the place to elaborate on what these trends are. But, broadly speaking, organized capitalism, the industrial proletariat, the labour movement and the very idea of socialism itself were all brought to their mature modern forms alongside and in conditions (around the turn of the century) associated with the ‘Fordist revolution’ in the organization of modern production. ‘Fordism’ stands for the large-scale, flow processes of the modern factory, the skilled factory proletariat, the intensification of management, the rise of the corporate giants, the spread of mass consumption, the concentration of capital, the forward march of the technical division of labour, the intensification of world competition and the further spread of capitalism as a ‘global system’. This was never only an ‘economic’ revolution. It was always a cultural and social revolution as well (as Gramsci, who discussed the connection of ‘Fordism’ with the reorganization of sexual life in his classic essay, ‘American and Fordism’ perfectly understood).²

Now we are beginning, in the usual highly uneven and contradictory way, to move into a ‘post-Fordist’ society – what some theorists call disorganized capitalism, the era of ‘flexible specialization’.³ One way of reading present developments is that ‘privatization’ is Thatcherism’s way
of harnessing and appropriating this underlying movement within a specific economic and political strategy and constructing it within the terms of a specific philosophy. It has succeeded, to some degree, in aligning its historical, political, cultural and sexual 'logics' with some of the most powerful tendencies in the contemporary logics of capitalist development. And this, in part, is what gives it its supreme confidence, its air of ideological complicity: what makes it appear to 'have history on its side', to be coterminal with the inevitable course of the future. The left, however, instead of rethinking its economic, political and cultural strategies in the light of this deeper, underlying 'logic' of dispersal and diversification (which, after all, need not necessarily be an enemy of greater democratization), simply resists it. If Thatcherism can lay claim to it, then we must have nothing to do with it. Is there any more certain way of rendering yourself historically anachronistic?

'The significance of change' also has a more practical meaning in relation to this crisis. We cannot simply defend the NHS as it is, as if nothing has happened since it was first introduced in 1947. In practice, the Left can only seize the political advantage by mounting its own critique of the NHS - since as everybody quietly recognizes, things were not hunky-dory in the NHS long before the advent of Thatcherism; and not all the problems are of Thatcherism's making. Steve Iliffe long ago convincingly argued that, in fact, there is not one, but 'two inter-connected crises within the health service. One is a direct consequence of the economic recession and Conservative attempts to escape from it' (coupled, we would add with Thatcherism's project to restructure the welfare state). 'The second is a long-term structural crisis of medicine itself running over decades and common to the industrialized world.'

There is a deeper side to this as well. We may have to acknowledge that there is often a rational core to Thatcherism's critique, which reflects some real substantive issues, which Thatcherism did not create but addresses in its own way. And since, in this sense, we both inhabit the same world, the left will have to address them too. However, squaring up to them means confronting some extremely awkward issues. One example is the fiscal crisis of the welfare state - the ever-rising relative costs in the NHS as the average age of the population rises, medical technology leaps ahead, health needs diversify, the awareness of environmental factors and preventive medicine deepens and the patterns of disease shift. The fiscal crisis of the welfare state is not simply a Thatcherite plot, though of course Thatcherism exaggerates it for its own political ends.

The left's answer is that there is more to spend if we choose; and this is certainly correct, given Britain's pitiful comparative showing in terms of the proportion of GDP spent on health amongst the industrialized
countries. But only up to a point. At the end of this road, there are limits, which are not those set by Thatcherism’s artificial ‘cap’ on spending but those limits set by the productivity of the economy itself. What the right argues is that, once this limit is reached (even at the USA’s 10.7 per cent rather than the UK’s miserable 5.9 per cent), there is then not much to choose between rationing by price (which they would prefer) and rationing by queue (which is what has been going on in the NHS for decades). Naturally, they prefer rationing by price, since it increases the incentive to the patient to save on costs and puts pressure on the ‘health market’ to become more efficient. We have rooted objections to this path: but this must be because we have a different game-plan, not because we are playing in a different ball-park. But have we spelt it out? Do our supporters and the public know what it is?

One thing for certain, then, that we mean by ‘strategic’ is thinking in a sustained, interconnected way – right through to that painful point where one policy crosses another. The point, for example, on the one hand, where simply ‘spending more on the NHS’ comes up against the barrier of the failure of the left so far to elaborate a strategy for an expanding economy. On the other hand, where it hits the roadblock of the unpopularity of higher taxation in the form of that entrenched figure (which, at the moment, belongs exclusively to the right) – the ‘sovereign taxpayer’. Thatcherism is also held in place by this ideological figure of ‘economic man’, the measure of all things, who only understands cash-in-hand, readies-in-the-pocket, and who apparently never gets ill, doesn’t need his streets cleaned or his children educated or to breathe oxygen occasionally. Clearly, the NHS issue cannot be won in terms of the NHS alone. If Thatcherism wins the argument about ‘wealth creation’, ‘prosperity’ and ‘taxpayer freedom’, it will, sooner or later, win the argument about privatizing the NHS.

Of course, you only get a clear sense of strategy going among the people you are trying to win over to your side, if they can see clearly how it is counterposed to the strategy of the other side, what the underlying organizing principles are, and the perspective, the ‘philosophical themes’, which distinguish them. Successive encounters at the dispatch box are small beer when compared with a systematic form of ideological contestation which polarizes every topic between their ‘way of conceptualizing it and ‘ours’, and drives home in popular consciousness the clear distinction of principle between them. (Mrs Thatcher set the scene for her ascendancy in exactly this way in the late 1970s, remorselessly punctuating the world into a series of vividly contrasting images – Labour’s ‘statism’ against her ‘freedom’ – making the flat earth of consensus politics into a contested battle-zone.) We have to find ways of dramatizing the difference between the public and the private definition
of social need, between medical care by income or by need, between a first-rate service for the few and a second-rate one for the majority, between paying for health by universal standard contribution and paying for it by privatized insurance. These are organizing principles, pertinent to but not restricted to the NHS (they apply, pari passu to education) because they are the bare bones of a social philosophy we are attempting to unfold by articulating it.

Contestation, however, is not enough, because by itself it is too negative. Thatcherism did not simply mount a principled critique of 'statism'. It unfolded a positive conception of the 'enterprise culture', which has taken root, despite the left's scepticism, to an astonishing degree. This suggests that, whilst much of it is political hype, some of it connects with real issues in the popular mind (its 'rational core'?). For example, Britain's relative 'backwardness', its sluggish performance even as compared with other capitalist countries, its suffocating traditionalism, which is linked with one of Mrs Thatcher's favourite targets – the power of entrenched vested interest.

To develop this more positive perspective, means thematizing the NHS crisis in terms of wider ideological debates: for example, around 'the politics of choice' or the question of the market versus the state. The popular theme of 'choice' has no 'necessary belongingness' to Thatcherism. It can just as well be understood as belonging to an older, deeper, complex of attitudes: 'Why shouldn't ordinary people have a piece of the action too?' Put this way, 'choice' is as much part of the political repertoire of popular radicalism as it is of the populist radical right. The problem is that Thatcherism articulated this popular desire to the 'free market' and the very powerful idea of 'freedom' – which in reality can only satisfy it in a certain form, at a certain price: and the left, having accepted this linkage (secured not by nature but by the politics of Thatcherism) consequently abandoned choice. It nevertheless remains possible to reconstruct the idea of 'choice' in relation to such themes as the growing diversity of society, the widening of access, the empowerment of ordinary people through their 'right to choose' (even if it is only, to start with, choosing their GP, or having a wider range of therapies and community support services available at health centres or simply the right to know what is wrong with you or see your own medical records); or in terms of the contrast between negative and positive freedom. In short, dramatizing the NHS crisis in relation to the concepts Thatcherism has not managed to appropriate: democratization, rights and the expansion of social citizenship.

However, the left should not expect to get very far on this issue until it has clarified its mind on the underlying issue of strategic principle – that of 'market or state'. The left had a critique of 'statism' – whether of
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the new right. But, in part because of Labourism's complicity with the
latter variant, we never pushed that thinking past the point where the
free-marketeers could hijack it. The so-called 'rediscovery of the
market' is not a phenomenon exclusively of the right (as any Hungarian,
Soviet or Chinese economist will soon tell you). And the greater flexi-
bility, flow of information and maximization of choice which the market
signals is part of that 'dynamics of change' which we identified earlier.

However, 'the market' in this generic sense is quite different from the
'free play of capitalist market forces' (another Thatcherite elision). And
both are different again from the 'religion of the market' - 'value-for-
money' as the sole criterion of the good life or of social need. In their
unregulated forms, 'market forces', now as always, create wealth and
dynamic at one end, and gross inequalities and deprivation at the other.
As for value for money as the only measure of the social good, and Mrs
Thatcher's 'new Benthamites' who 'take the modern shopkeeper,
especially the English shopkeeper, as the normal man' and apply 'this
yard measure to past, present and future', surely Marx said the last word
on Mr Tebbit, Mr Baker, Lord Young, Mr Ridley and this tribe of
philistines: 'geniuses in the way of bourgeois stupidity'. In a proper
conception of modernity, they are cultural primitives. They have hardly
come down from the trees.

Just as we have not thought through what the left 'appropriation' of
the market means - what forms it can take, how far it should go, what
are its necessary limits - so our critique of 'statism' remains at an
extremely primitive level. If 'the state' is no longer to be the monolithic
caretaker of socialism, what is it? What are the institutional forms of a
responsive (rather than a prescriptive) state? Or a regulative (rather than
a centralizing) state? Of a state whose function is not to curtail but to
expand civil society and the democratic character of social life? And
(the joker in the pack) how, if not through the state in some form, is the
'social interest' to be formulated and represented? Can the left abandon
the ideas of the rational planning of resources and the rational choice
between priorities in a society of scarcity, together with the 'grand narra-
tives' of reason and progress? Can we combine a greater use of the
market mechanism with greater regulation (rather than with 'deregulation')?
We raise these awkward thoughts to drive home the point that a
left in quest of a strategic position in political life must launch this
debate and take command of this agenda itself, rather than be dragged
along in the slipstream of the Adam Smith Institute.

The move from a monolithic 'state', the omnipresent provider, to a
pluralized 'civil society' also entails giving value in our thinking to areas
of social life and arenas where we put in play new social identities which
classically the left has much neglected. For example, in relation to the NHS, the role of consumers of health care in defining needs and how they are met; or our ‘rights’ as citizens of an increasingly ‘well’ society, alongside our place as producers and suppliers. This marks the coming into play, within the discourses of a contemporary socialism, of the politics of the private as well as the public; of domestic, familial and sexual life as well as the life of the republic; ‘the personal as political’. Where better to see how in modern society, these so-called ‘separate spheres’ increasingly interpenetrate than by looking at the arena of health, medical care, illness and the body? Where better to open up the exciting challenge of trying, in the context of the NHS debate, to think them together? This is one of the elements which anyone who has listened attentively to the radio phone-ins on the NHS will have heard being enunciated with remarkable clarity.

This shift in the postwar period from the ever-expanding state to a more diverse democratized ‘civil society’ state (and a ‘withering’ state) is one of the most profound advances to have taken place in the thinking of the left this century. It transforms the very meaning and image of socialism. It is to begin to think socialism anew from the perspective of some of the major themes of the agenda of feminism and sexual politics. (Is anybody in Walworth Road ready for that?) And it is startlingly new (allowing us therefore to appropriate many themes which our commitment to ‘statism’ precluded) because it has taken on and been transformed by the modern experience of contemporary society. The whole ‘experience’ of the deformations of both Stalinism and Fabian social democracy are inscribed in that shift.

We have been concentrating, so far, on question of ‘popular conceptions’. However, ‘strategy’ cannot be a matter of ideological politics alone. It is also a question of how to construct around those conceptions, a popular politics or, to put it more simply, the difficult business of constructing alliances. The left needs to build a majority around the NHS, not passively reflect the fragile consensus which is already there. Since this is composed of such heterogeneous social interests as are those represented by the BMA, senior consultants, junior doctors, nurses and ancillary health workers, it is an extremely unlikely alliance, destined to fall apart at the first touch of Thatcherism’s magic wand if not consolidated around some common points of unity and welded into a ‘bloc’. Any broader alliance in favour of some form of free, universal health care will have to be constructed across classes. That is, it will have self-consciously to be the result of a politics dedicated to speaking to people in quite different social positions. The great majorities of the dispossessed, for whom a publicly funded NHS is a life-line; the low-wage, unemployed and single-parent families who could not manage
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without it; the overwhelming bulk of working people, whom Edwina Currie invited to forgo their fortnight's holiday in order to be able to afford 'adequate' private health insurance; but also teachers and public sector workers and people in the service economy and those in the middle class, who might be able to afford some sort of medical premium but who value a service within the 'enterprise culture' where the best goes to those who need it most rather than to those who earn or possess the most. This is a politics which is at last face to face with, and knows how to address, the great diversity of contemporary society.

The idea of using the crisis to construct a majority means giving up the illusion of a built-in, permanent, automatic majority for the welfare state. It is better to start by assuming that there are no 'natural majorities' for anything. Class, the great backstop of the left, has certainly not disappeared. Indeed, nowhere is it so powerful as etched in the class distribution of illness, types of health care, and death. But the underlying social, economic and cultural forces which are bringing the era of 'organized capitalism' to a close, coupled with the vigour of Thatcherite restructuring, have decomposed and fragmented class as a unified political force, fracturing any so-called automatic linkages between economics and politics: if, indeed, any such 'unity' or 'automatic linkage' ever existed (which I beg leave to doubt). The multiplication of new points of antagonism, which is also characteristic of our emerging 'post-industrial' societies, while making available new potential sites of intervention, further fragments the political field, dispersing rather than unifying the different social constituencies. These processes have unpacked the old majorities (which were, of course, never 'natural' but politically constructed) and eroded the old agendas of the left.

The stubborn truth is that social interests are contradictory. There is no automatic correspondence between class location, political position and ideological inclination. Majorities have to be 'made' and 'won' - not passively reflected. They will be composed of heterogeneous social interests, represented through conflicting social identities - like the ones emerging around the NHS. Unless they are unified by some larger political project which overrides, without obliterating, their real differences, they will fall apart (more likely, Mrs Thatcher, who does know how to recognize and exploit differences, will blow them apart).

As well as trying to unify the existing social interests and identities, the left also has to put itself 'on the side of' the new constituencies. For example, the greater involvement of mothers in the hospital care of children; the social movements for a healthier diet, for better care of the body, for greater control by women over their fertility and reproduction; for a less unequal relationship between patients and the medical profession; for more preventive medicine, a healthier environment, a
programme of health education that is not at the mercy of the industrial lobbies, the pharmaceutical companies or the homophobic and anti-abortionist bigots of the 'moral monority'. If it knew how to articulate these new forces within the great levelling experience of illness, which hits everyone sooner or later irrespective of wealth or class or sexual preference, it would soon discover that society, looked at in a more diversified way, is not at all 'passive' about new needs in the field of health and medical care. People think the NHS needs more funds. But they are also willing to do something about it, as the public health movement, 'Health Alert' or the Terrence Higgins Trust suggest. The link, so often forged willy-nilly by the left, between welfare and passivity has been disastrous. But it is not inevitable.

If this is to be part of a wider, popular political strategy, it has to be fought in the end as 'a struggle for popular identities'. That is, it must draw to itself the widest range of popular aspirations about health and enable different sorts of people to see themselves reflected in this emerging conception of health and thus come increasingly to identify with it. Once you give up the idea of an automatic identification with the welfare state which is guaranteed by class position, you are obliged to address the subjective moment in politics because, unless people identify with and become the subjects of a new conception of society, it cannot materialise. Thatcherism has a perfectly focused conception of who its ideal subjects are, those who best personify its sacred values. It has used its moral agenda as one of the principal areas where these identities are defined – the respectable normal folk who people the fantasies of the new right in relation to current debates around abortion, child abuse, sex education, gay rights and Aids. It is above all through this moral agenda that the new right has become a cultural force. Significantly, all these issues of 'moral hygiene' explode directly into an expanded definition of social health.

Labour has no moral agenda of its own except an inherited, conservative one. Consequently, it is not a force that is actively shaping the culture and educating desire. The paradox is that, banished by the front door, the politics of identity and desire return by the back door to exact a terrible, regressive revenge ('the London effect').

It should, by now, be crystal clear that 'learning from Thatcherism' is neither an easy nor simple task and is light years away from trying to do what Thatcherism does, only with a bit more 'caring'. It is a painful exercise since it plainly involves the left squaring up to its own past in a radical way and confronting head-on the forces which are undermining the very ground on which it has traditionally stood.
Notes