O'Hara, Kieron. "Margaret Thatcher (1925–2013)." *Conservative Moments: Reading Conservative Texts*. Ed. Mark Garnett. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. 127–136. Textual Moments in the History of Political Thought. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350001565.ch-016>>.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Margaret Thatcher (1925–2013)

Kieron O'Hara

I think we've been through a period where too many people have been given to understand that if they have a problem, it's the government's job to cope with it. 'I have a problem, I'll get a grant.' 'I'm homeless, the government must house me.' They're casting their problems on society. And you know, there's no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look after themselves first. It's our duty to look after ourselves and then, also, to look after our neighbours. People have got the entitlements too much in mind, without the obligations. There's no such thing as entitlement, unless someone has first met an obligation.¹

Margaret Thatcher is unique in this volume in that her most famous venture into philosophy appeared in an outlet better known for recipes, celebrity gossip and agony columns. The above excerpt, from an interview she gave to the lifestyle magazine *Woman's Own* in October 1987, became the focus of considerable ridicule and outrage.

The medium of a magazine interview was characteristic of a politician who, though not an original theoretician, was a notable communicator – as her political opponent Tony Benn suggested, a great teacher² – whose

political success rested upon appealing to elements of the electorate whom other members of her party had never come close to reaching. But it took a long time for the Conservative Party to live down this particular interview. Thatcher herself muttered that her meaning had been ‘distorted beyond recognition’,³ into a supposed celebration of hard-hearted Tory devil-take-the-hindmost individualism. Eventually, while campaigning for the Conservative leadership in 2005, David Cameron settled on the argument that ‘We know we have a shared responsibility, that we’re all in this together, that there is such a thing as society; it’s just not the same thing as the state,’⁴ and promoted his idea of the ‘big society’ in order to put the nagging issue to bed.

Thatcher’s status is problematic. She self-identified as conservative, but was equally proud of her radicalism. *The Downing Street Years*, her most comprehensive presentation of her own ideas,⁵ presents an energetic and iconoclastic figure who was also reasonably candid about the practical checks on her powers, and the consequent need to pick her fights judiciously.⁶ It is partisan, written shortly after her defenestration as prime minister in November 1990, when memories of that bitter time were still strong. Although it is a vital source, it is hardly a neutral account of the evolution of her thinking, especially in the earlier period of her premiership.

This chapter explores three questions. First, what is the nature of Thatcher’s political philosophy, and in particular the uncompromising statement that ‘there is no such thing as society’? Second, can we judge whether her policies in office were consistent with a tenable understanding of conservatism? Third, can we trace some of the antecedents of her thinking, and place her, tentatively at least, within a tradition?

Thatcher’s journey

Nothing in Margaret Thatcher’s career prior to 1974 suggested an underlying determination to launch an aggressive challenge against her party’s establishment and accepted parameters of the politically possible. She served loyally in Edward Heath’s cabinet (1970–74), and her most prominent ideological statement before then, her Conservative Party Centre (CPC) lecture of 1968, was not outspokenly radical. Indeed, Thatcher reproached herself later for not developing her pre-existing ideas into a coherent framework.⁷ Some⁸ have found her claim to have been a consistent Hayekian⁹ somewhat unconvincing, but many of the themes prominent in her later thinking, such as the importance of citizens’ independence of government, and the link between hard work and higher income, were present in her CPC lecture.¹⁰

A not inaccurate caricature of Conservative Party history from 1945 to 1975 is that of an ongoing attempt to recover from the psychological blow of its landslide electoral defeat in 1945. Broadly speaking, there were

two classes of response. The 'orthodox' approach, amply represented in the senior ranks of the party, accepted at least part of the argument for planning, welfare and economic controls, and claimed to be better able to manage these in government than the Labour Party. The resulting consensus may have been overplayed by commentators, but is broadly persuasive. Electorally, the strategy was reasonably successful, and produced seventeen years of Tory government out of thirty.

Many Conservative Party members, however, resented dancing to the other party's tune. The second response was therefore resistance, often based on the free-market arguments of F. A. Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* (1944). The mutual consistency of markets and conservatism seemed clear in two respects. First, change via the decisions of individuals in a free market appeared 'organic' in a way that change imposed from Whitehall did not; and second, a free market would increase personal responsibility and minimize free riding on the welfare state, by exposing individuals to the consequences of their actions. The leading proponent of this view, Enoch Powell, caused a mixture of puzzlement and fear among his colleagues on the Conservative front bench, from which he was sacked in 1968 after expressing his forthright views on immigration.¹¹

The party leader after 1965, Edward Heath, tried to establish a position in opposition which was distinct from both the 'consensus' and the views of Hayek. In government, however, he reversed direction in the face of growing unemployment, adopting an inflationary Keynesian economic policy instead. After its ignominious failure and the fall of Heath's government in February 1974, the ex-minister Sir Keith Joseph began to propound his view that conservatism had been neglected by the Conservative Party.¹² After a further Conservative defeat in October 1974, Joseph looked set to challenge Heath for the leadership; his ally Thatcher stepped into his shoes when he decided not to run.

Thatcher and Conservative ideology

As Conservative leader, Thatcher took on board the untested theory of monetarism, to the anger of anti-theoretic Conservatives.¹³ Thatcher herself argued that she applied the theory judiciously,¹⁴ and its use as an organizing principle for the reforms she wished to introduce, particularly in public spending,¹⁵ does not in itself rule her out as a conservative. She despised the political skill of compromise.¹⁶ Nevertheless, there is nothing necessarily conservative about compromise, and nothing necessarily compromising about conservatism.

Thatcher (in her memoirs) more or less conflates conservatism and the radical free-market ideas of Hayek.¹⁷ As has been argued by conservatives since Burke, conservatism does not rule out change, even radical change. The point of conservatism is to raise the barriers to change, and to put

the burden of proof of social value onto the innovator.¹⁸ This entails that a conservative can support radical policies when the status quo is (by some relevant measure) unsatisfactory, because the risk of harm from the innovation is outweighed by the risks of stasis. Britain in the 1970s was widely perceived as an economic and social basket case;¹⁹ in Thatcher's words, 'Britain in 1979 was a nation that had had the stuffing knocked out of it.' 'Everything we wished to do [in 1979] had to fit into the overall strategy of reversing Britain's economic decline [while] however difficult the road might be ... we intended to achieve a fundamental change of direction', even if this 'would not be possible without some measure of discord'.²⁰

One relevant metric was the nation's international reputation. Even the Falklands War was fought 'to defend our honour as a nation',²¹ and victory was celebrated as showing that 'We have ceased to be a nation in retreat.' National character was a real aspect of personality, so 'Reversing our economic decline was one part of the task of restoring Britain's reputation; demonstrating that we were not the sort of people to bow before dictators was another.' Her subsequent criticism of the European Union (EU) was based on the worry that 'British democracy, parliamentary sovereignty, the common law, our traditional sense of fairness, our ability to run our affairs in our own way [would] be subordinated to the demands of a remote European bureaucracy, resting on very different traditions'. She was concerned, like Burke, that 'our country ought to be lovely',²² and sounded another Burkean note in her party's 1983 election manifesto, invoking 'a great chain of people stretching back into the past and forwards into the future ... linked by a common belief in freedom, and in Britain's greatness. All are aware of their own responsibility to contribute to both'.²³ Note how Thatcher went beyond even Burke's active notion of a partnership or contract among the living, the dead and the yet to be born, by emphasizing the particular duties that members of the chain must undertake.

Thatcher's practice

Thatcher's abiding aim was to change the relationship between the individual and the state, focusing on 'the extension of choice, the dispersal of power and the encouragement of responsibility'. The sale of council houses, for example, created a sudden increase in property ownership (and therefore, on conservative thinking, in the number of people with a stronger interest in stability), while reducing the influence of the state, or local councils, over the population.²⁴

Michael Oakeshott argued that innovation should be a means to correct an existing problem, not to displace theoretical opportunity costs or implement a vision of perfection.²⁵ From this point of view, Thatcher's first term of office had conservative aspects, dealing with a range of identified problems from militant trade unionism to stifling tax rates.²⁶ Oakeshott's distinction,

however, is not always straightforward to make out in practice. Thatcher argued that Britain's problem was, at least in part, a 'centralizing, managerial, bureaucratic, interventionist style of government' associated with the post-war consensus. Intervention covered a wide range of contingencies, and governments would even 'run advertising campaigns to persuade people of the virtues of dependence' on the ground that a 'disinterested civil service, with access to the best and latest information, was better able to foresee economic eventualities and to propose responses to them than were the blind forces of the so-called "free market".' Though the Conservative Party opposed this doctrine in principle, its governments 'never tried seriously to reverse it'.²⁷ She was determined not to flinch from the challenge.

Thatcher thought that civil associations were undermined by the state. For instance, she strongly rejected the common claim that the urban riots of 1981 were an indication that economic policy was causing social breakdown. She insisted that the deprivation and squalor of the troubled estates would have galvanized communities to clear up the mess if they weren't lacking both respect for the law and 'a sense of pride and personal responsibility – something that the state can easily remove but almost never give back'. The well-being of democracy depended on 'limitation of the powers of government, a market economy, private property – and the sense of personal responsibility without which no such system could be sustained'.²⁸

Trade union reform could also be cast as a removal of a problem in Oakeshott's sense. As Thatcher put it, 'trade union immunities had combined with nationalized monopolies to give huge power to the trade unions in these industries'. Furthermore, she believed, not irrationally, that some trade unionists were trying to overthrow her government. Context was all; unions were not necessarily bad. For example, they were important in Poland because the Poles did not have free elections or other means of expressing themselves.²⁹

Her union reforms often (though not always) involved changes to civil law, not criminal law, so that holding unions to account for the consequences of their actions would be left to companies or dissatisfied trade unionists, rather than a prescriptive government. Government's job was merely 'to establish a framework of stability – whether constitutional stability, the rule of law, or the economic stability produced by sound money – within which individual families and businesses were free to pursue their own dreams and ambitions'.³⁰ In the end, though, Thatcher's belief that unions caused unemployment by raising the price of labour in the absence of productivity improvements resulted in an acceleration of the reforms.

In her first term, the problems Thatcher addressed had been widely accepted as pressing priorities, but as her confidence grew and divisions within the ranks of the opposition made her position seem impregnable, her judgements grew more personal and opportunistic, as with privatization of state-owned industries.³¹ The 1986 'Big Bang', the deregulation of the City of London, was a naked attempt to reduce opportunity costs – hardly the

‘natural corollary to the earlier abolition of exchange controls’ presented by Cannadine.³² Her resolutely non-interventionist approach to economics contrasted sharply with her later forays into social policy, which betrayed her desire to ‘strengthen ... the traditional virtues’. In Oakeshottian terms, this was merely a variant of the left-wing characterization of the state as an ‘enterprise association’. In education, she abandoned her ‘healthy distrust of the state using central control of the syllabus as a means of propaganda’, and developed a national curriculum to counter the influence of ‘left-wing local authorities, teachers and pressure groups’, though in the end this merely opened new interventionist opportunities for the Department for Education and Science. She was reluctant to see fundamental changes in the National Health Service (NHS) because it ‘delivered a high quality of care ... at a reasonably modest unit cost’, but favoured a review because it was a ‘bottomless money pit’. Yet even there, she became worried because, ‘under Treasury pressure’ the government was ‘moving away from, rather than towards, radical reforms’.³³

A possible source?

Following the defeat of the Conservatives in February 1974, Thatcher found Joseph’s new intellectual position congenial. This combined a concern with the government’s fiscal rectitude (expressed in her early years of office in the theory of monetarism, although that was ultimately abandoned, on the grounds that money was too difficult to measure³⁴), with emphasis on (i) the importance of an individual’s own endeavour within a framework of free enterprise to shore up both that individual’s self-respect and welfare, and wider prosperity, and (ii) the concomitant dangers of socialism and welfarism undermining that framework and gradually chipping away at self-reliance. Yet Thatcher did not emulate Joseph’s genuine agonizing about the problems of those who are not equipped, perhaps because of poor education, poverty, deprivation or addiction, to use their freedom constructively within a free market.³⁵ In the words of Thatcher’s biographer, ‘Joseph was the intellectual driving force of Thatcherism, but he was also, by character, a Hamlet.’³⁶ In contrast, Thatcher was more likely to bring Coriolanus to mind.

Was Thatcher’s individualism so complete that social aggregations greater than the family were irrelevant to her, as a variety of critics have alleged on the basis of the *Woman’s Own* interview? One potential, and neglected, source of her thinking that may also serve as a point of comparison is Angus Maude’s philosophical tract *The Common Problem*.

Maude was, like his friend Enoch Powell, a Conservative dissenter from the post-war consensus; and, like Powell, he was sacked from Edward Heath’s Shadow Cabinet. He worked with Thatcher during and after her

leadership campaign, and was rewarded with a place in her first cabinet. His philosophy of self-reliance and individualism was somewhat romantic and, in its time, *sui generis*.³⁷ Much of his argument derives from an analysis on the topic of ‘society’, which he conceived to be a statistical abstraction of no relevance. He deplores, in Tocquevillian terms, the dissolving of Burke’s ‘little platoons’ by larger, less heterogeneous and more predictable statistical abstractions, and the severing of connections with the past.³⁸ ‘It is *not* “society” that provides social security, but State administrators dispensing the taxpayers’ money. There is *not* a “social conscience” – only individuals laboriously seeking to persuade an apathetic (but vaguely benevolent) majority of the need for reforms. There are no “social needs” – only people in trouble, who need to be thought of and helped as people’.³⁹

Maude argued that, in a world where statistical patterns of mass behaviour have become accepted as norms,

The bewildered individual, seeking lost authority, certainty and standards, is reduced to social conformism. It is a kind of ‘back to the womb’ movement, or at the least a demand not to grow out of the childhood state of security without responsibility. And ‘society’ is expected to provide the security. Here we have the demand for ‘social security’, which means that ‘society’ must increasingly take over the moral and financial responsibilities of individuals and families. But ‘society’, of course, cannot do this, for it does not exist.⁴⁰

There may or may not be a causal connection between Maude’s work and Thatcher’s philosophy. Thatcher paid tribute to Maude’s ‘sound views’ in her memoirs,⁴¹ but their personal connection seems to have ended when, aged 69, Maude resigned from her cabinet. *The Common Problem* (unlike *Change is Our Ally*, a CPC pamphlet Maude co-edited with Enoch Powell in 1954) is mentioned neither in her memoirs nor in any of the major biographies.

Yet the parallels are clear, and also help us diagnose the political problem of Thatcher’s provocative phrases. Unlike Maude, she mentions no intermediate units between families and societies. But her positive point, that people are better off in all senses if they take control of their own environments, follows him. She also made much, in the *Woman’s Own* interview and elsewhere, of the importance of behavioural and moral standards, another major theme of Maude’s.⁴²

We noted earlier that Thatcher’s organic vision of a ‘great chain’ stretching backwards and forwards in time emphasized the responsibilities of individuals to forge the links themselves. Like Maude, Thatcher rejected a vision of society as a set of abstract forces with the cumulative capability of becoming an agent in its own right, taking over responsibility for individuals’ agency, housing them, clearing up their neighbourhoods

and keeping them secure. And with Maude too, she argued that the state agencies which offer to take on this role are not merely harmless props which ameliorate some of the drudgery of existence and help citizens feel more secure, at the (minor?) cost of infantilizing them. Taking responsibility for one's own duties is essential not only for sustaining one's identity as a free, autonomous individual, but also in sustaining the social relationships that underpin a vigorous and healthy democracy.⁴³

Thatcher's legacy

Among his many idiosyncratic views, Maude believed that 'the acquisitive wealthy may be a greater menace to the private property of others, and more careless of its rights, than the State itself'.⁴⁴ Thatcher, by contrast, was extremely relaxed on this subject. In the *Woman's Own* interview, she remarked that working for money

is the great driving engine, the driving force of life. There is nothing wrong with having a lot more money It is not the fact of having money. It is whether it becomes the sole or only thing in your life and you want money because it is money. The exercise of the spirit and the inspiration is what you do with that money. There is nothing wrong in wanting more.⁴⁵

Yet, despite Thatcher's moral injunctions, people did not seem to use their freedom as prudently as they might. Newly liberated from controls on spending and borrowing, individuals still consumed more than they earned, either demanding wages which increased faster than productivity, or taking advantage of new credit lines, so that personal indebtedness rose more quickly than earnings.⁴⁶ This, and its political consequences, had been anticipated by Maude:

A preoccupation with increasing private consumption is more likely to distort priorities so that public provision lags behind private affluence, as the United States and Australia demonstrate. We ourselves could have better hospitals now, if we wanted them enough.⁴⁷

Similar issues arose with privatization. Clearly conservatives are more comfortable with industry in private hands rather than the state's, but they also prefer competition to monopoly; and some privatizations ended up preserving the very monopolies that, in Thatcher's own analysis, boosted union power,⁴⁸ while the pragmatics of government meant that much of the proceeds were simply taken as income to pay for tax cuts, rather than capital to invest in infrastructure.⁴⁹

Conclusion

Margaret Thatcher enjoyed being radical,⁵⁰ and did many radical things. As we have seen, conservatism is not necessarily inconsistent with radical change, and indeed many prominent small-c conservatives served Thatcher loyally.⁵¹ However, Thatcher's conservatism (notwithstanding her continuing identification of Burke as her ideological mentor⁵²) did not survive into her third term of office. Indeed, many of her actions in the 1980s were ideologically ambiguous.

This is particularly the case with her notorious 'no such thing' statement. Comparison with Angus Maude's formulation of the same basic idea suggests an important purpose behind it – the desire to empower individuals and communities, to give them the space and resources to define and solve their own problems, and to give them a stake in their own future.

Yet, in *The Common Problem*, Maude was careful to point out that there are many meaningful and valuable social structures beyond the bean counters' statistical abstractions. Thatcher, by contrast, used her *Woman's Own* interview to express a hostility to the idea of 'society' which was too vehement for her to acknowledge the value of intermediate institutions. In this respect, while the criticism from the Left was predictable, her views were difficult even for British Conservatives to endorse. As Tocqueville argued, the assumption that *all* we have is men, women and families is as dehumanizing an abstraction as the ones made by the left-wing planners.⁵³