

# **Class, culture and morality: a sociological analysis of neo-conservatism**

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## **Abstract**

In Britain, as in many other western countries, there emerged in the mid-1970s a variety of business associations, policy and research institutes and political leagues, committed not only to the restoration of a Conservative government, but also to a much broader refurbishing of conservatism. A network of organizations, individuals and ideas grew up that became identified as the New Right.

The New Right, which clearly has an international character, was generated by economic and political crises, but it was nurtured by a variety of resentments and discontents whose roots lay in structural and cultural changes that had developed over the whole post-war period. Drawing, in part, upon interviews with leaders of the organisations that did most to mobilize opinion behind the New Right in Britain, the article examines the major changes – particularly those in class structure and in culture – to which the new conservatives were reacting.

It explores the major ideological strands – libertarian, neo-liberal and conservative – and looks at the attempts by the New Right to use these to produce changes not only in economic policy but in the cultural and moral fabric of society.

The 1970s was a decade of social movements. In Britain, as in most western countries, there was evident dissatisfaction with the working of liberal democratic institutions. Parliament was claimed to have lost power to the executive; the mass parties, it was said, fudged and compromised and were no longer responsive to their rank and file supporters; important issues were inadequately represented in political debate. So, many people turned to associations and organisations that campaigned for particular interests and joining social movements became an important way of doing political business.

A good many movements – the feminist movement or the ecology movement for example – drew upon predominantly ‘liberal’ or ‘left’ sentiments, but there were other forms of collective action that expressed rather different points of view. The early 1970s saw the emergence of specifically ‘moral’ campaigns mounted by the Festival of Light, and the National Viewers’ and Listeners’ Association (NVLA) against the tide of social and sexual ‘permissiveness’.<sup>1</sup> These campaigns attempted to restore the centrality of specifically Christian values, or to re-establish Reithian standards of ‘decency’ and ‘family values’ in the media’s representation of sexual conduct. Many who did not join, doubtless sympathised.

In the mid-1970s, there emerged too a host of new associations which, while they seemed to share some of the disquiets of the ‘moral’ movements, were explicitly concerned with economic and political discontents. The most visible and numerous of these were associations of businessmen – typically small, independent businessmen – such as the National Federation of the Self-Employed (NFSE), the Association of Self-Employed People (ASP), the Independent Business Persons’ Association (IBPA), and the National Association of the Self-Employed People (NASE). Somewhat later, the Forum of Private Business was formed. Together with a number of older organisations like the Union of Independent Companies (UIC), and the Association of Independent Businesses (AIB) these new associations gave voice to the grievances of non-corporate business in Britain. At the same time, the opposition of corporate capital to the policies of the 1974 Labour government was made increasingly plain by spokesmen for the CBI and the Institute of Directors and behind the scenes a process of political mobilisation, as Michael Useem<sup>2</sup> has shown, was taking place via the social networks of Britain’s business elite. Increasing sums of money flowed from the large companies into the coffers of the Conservative party, the Economic League, British Industrialists United and there was continuing support for AIMS for Industry and new money for the recently created Centre for Policy Studies. It is hard now to recapture the atmosphere of crisis engendered by the ‘three day week’, the miners strike and the right-wing reaction to the defeat of Edward Heath in 1974, but out of it grew some strident responses. Vigilante groups – GB75 and Civil Assistance – appeared and MPs John Gorst and Willie Orr founded The Middle Class Association. Of much more enduring significance was a political league, The National

Association for Freedom (later The Freedom Association), set up in 1975 to provide not only rhetorical support for the radical right but also a campaigning organisation eager to use the processes of law to confront the government and trades unions in much publicised crusades.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the period, these associations and lobbies began to articulate a wide-ranging critique, not only of economic policy, though that was central, but also of British culture and politics. In this they were aided by a growing number of research and policy formation institutes – the Institute of Economic Affairs, the Centre for Policy Studies and later The Adam Smith Institute. Collectively all these bodies constituted what was referred to as the New Right. They were (and still are) literally ‘reactionary’ groupings born of resentment, anger and frustration at the post-war ‘welfare consensus’ in the UK. Margaret Thatcher’s election as leader of the Tory Party in 1975 was the signal for the formulation of a new conservatism which would blend elements of several discrete philosophies in a bid first to win political power, secondly to reform the economy and thirdly ‘to reconstruct the terrain of what is “taken for granted” in social and political thought – and so form a new common sense’<sup>4</sup> as Hall puts it.

Behind the specific economic policies and the particular social concerns lay two broad changes to which the New Right was responding: changes in the balance of class power and changes in the cultural order.

### **Changes in the balance of class power**

Resentment, anger, fear – all these were expressed by right wing apologists and the spokesmen for the business associations and the National Association for Freedom following the return to power in 1974 of Harold Wilson and his Labour colleagues. Having held office from 1964 to 1970 here were the socialist forces winning another election. To many middle-class observers and especially to capitalists large and small, it appeared that the old enemy – organised labour – was truly in the ascendant, an impression heightened by the actions of the government as it consulted union leaders, constructed social contracts with them, legislated to extend the closed shop and put in place the Employment Protection Act.

Small businessmen felt particularly aggrieved. Neglected by the

Heath government which was much more concerned to promote large, modern, technologically advanced enterprises, betrayed – so it seemed to them – by that same government's imposition of unsupportable taxes (the raising of National Insurance contributions) they now contemplated a bleak future with Labour back in power. Independent, non-corporate business had reason to complain that it had lost 'voice' and influence in the circles of economic and political decision making. Not only had a Conservative administration – 'their' government – failed to do anything to arrest the decline of the smaller business elements, a decline attested to by the Bolton Report in 1971,<sup>5</sup> but the political mobilisation of corporate business served only to accentuate their relative weakness. The CBI set up a special small business committee but this was viewed with disdain. If the interests of independent businesses were to be expressed, they would have to create new organisations to do that; and in 1974 and 1975 that is precisely what happened.

In the mid-1970s it seemed to many and not only the small capitalists – that the balance of political power had shifted. Labour was back in office again with a majority so slim that it would be even more dependent on the trades unions. According to Robert Moss, one of the original directors of the National Association for Freedom, it had been the case for several years that 'the key economic decisions that are taken, or are not taken, by government in Britain are taken in fear of strikes'.<sup>6</sup> That pattern he thought, would now be even more evident. And John Gorst, in a speech in 1975 to his short-lived Middle Class Association offered a view that enjoyed wide currency in this period when he judged that

We have seen an overwhelmingly moderate Trade Union Movement . . . taken over and transformed by a small group of militantly extreme individuals from the far left and from the Communist persuasion . . . so that they can manipulate the levers of both industrial and political power.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, capitalists large and small faced severe economic difficulties in Britain. Overall assessments of profit levels are always subject to some doubt but the best estimates suggest that company profits (pre-tax inflation-corrected rates of return on UK industrial and commercial capital) fell from around 8 per cent in the early 1970s to barely 3 per cent by 1980.<sup>8</sup> In the middle years of that decade inflation reached extraordinary levels.

In 1974 it stood at 16 per cent in 1975 it was 24.2 per cent, in 1976, 16.5 per cent and in 1977, 15.9 per cent.<sup>9</sup> Trading under these conditions was precarious and many companies closed or went bankrupt, and for individuals dependent upon dividends and savings, low profits and soaring inflation undermined their standards of living and threatened their hopes for economic security. The blame for this state of affairs, according to a spokesman for some of the newly-formed associations and think tanks, rested with governments that had pursued Keynesian – in their view ‘socialist’ – economic policies, with organised labour that had coerced them and with the Marxist left. Trade unions, we were told in our interviews with leaders of NAFF, had become the ‘tyrants of the time’ and those who espoused Marxian views constituted ‘the enemy within’.<sup>10</sup>

There was too a moral dimension to the discontent articulated by the new associations, the right-wing press and many individuals we spoke to. Inflation helped to promote policies and values that stood in sharp distinction to the moral precepts with which most small business people worked and which certainly informed the lives of a much wider section of the population. In the circumstances of the 1970s *thrift* ceased to have much purpose: *credit* was the order of the day. Labour governments pursued what were depicted as profligate, deficit-financed projects in much the same way that working class families were ‘known’ to seek ‘immediate’ rather than ‘deferred’ gratification. Once more the attribution of responsibility was plain to see. The values of the ‘middle class’ or as was increasingly said, the ‘bourgeoisie’, were being supplanted by those of the workers.

There was though in all this something of a paradox. The political, economic and even the moral ascent of the working class that was alleged to have occurred, took place at the point when the traditional, manual working class was declining markedly in relative importance as the older forms of unskilled and semi-skilled work were phased out and white collar jobs proliferated. In a remarkable article that foretold many of the developments that have occurred in Thatcher’s period of office, Norman Macrae, deputy editor of *The Economist* drew upon one of the key figures in the American neo-conservative movement to explain that there existed an additional and novel source of economic, political and social opposition:

A key paradox is that the switch from market-oriented to bureaucrat-dictated spending is usually philosophically supported by the political party that draws its votes from the oppressed proletariat, but is a switch that gets its support mainly, as Professor Irving Kristol has pointed out, from the fastest growing segment of the new middle class. Today 'this new class consists of scientists, lawyers, city planners, social workers, educators, criminologists, sociologists, public health doctors, etc. – a substantial number of whom find their careers in the expanding public sector rather than the private. The public sector, indeed, is where they prefer to be. They are, as one says, idealistic, far less interested in individual financial rewards than in the corporate power of their class.'<sup>11</sup>

It was precisely this kind of analysis that led so many of the leaders of the business associations, the Freedom Association and the politicians grouped around Margaret Thatcher and Sir Keith Joseph to identify elements of the new middle class – but especially public officials – as dangerous agents of an excessively regulatory state.<sup>12</sup> A bureaucratised intelligentsia ranked alongside the old working class as the target of the new Conservative hostility.

Inside the Tory Party itself changes of a class kind were also taking place in the mid-1970s. Thatcher's assumption of the leadership indicated the decline of the old patrician elements, of the landed gentlemen, and the rising fortunes of right-wing politicians, many of whom had been upwardly mobile. This change in social composition has continued through the 1980s and has been the subject of some amusing commentary inside the party. 'Two-button men' have largely replaced 'four-button men' according to Tory MP Julian Critchley who has developed this unobtrusive measure of status by counting the buttons on the cuff of a suit-jacket. The new Tories, unlike the gentlemen farmers, are quite willing to talk in class terms and to defend and reassert the interests and ideas of the bourgeoisie against those of both the working class and the 'new' class.

Throughout the 1970s major structural changes were indeed taking place in Britain as in other liberal democracies. Occupational and class structures were changing as jobs in manufacturing declined and those in service industries expanded, as women, especially married women, were drawn in large numbers into the labour force. The so-called new class of professional, semi-professional and technical works grew rapidly along with the

development of large bureaucratic corporations and the burgeoning of employment in public sector institutions in health care, education and local and central government. Small business, particularly in Britain, experienced real decline and in the conditions of the mid-1970s even large corporations faced severe difficulties. It was against this background of change and in the conditions of profound economic and political crisis that the New Right emerged and through sectors of the Tory Party, the political league, NAFF, the new or revitalised policy and research institutes began to offer a particular interpretation of these changes. It was an interpretation fiercely hostile to the working class, to the alleged power of its unions and party and passionately opposed to what it portrayed as the cultural dominance of the bureaucratised intelligentsia.<sup>13</sup>

### **Changes in the cultural order**

The 1960s were exciting, turbulent years, years which saw in Britain the dismantling of many of the social controls that had survived since the Victorian era. Legislative changes provide some indication of what was going on and the decade was heralded by the legalising of certain forms of gambling. A public lottery (Premium Savings Bonds) had been set up in 1956 and paved the way for the Betting and Gaming Act of 1960 allowing the licensing of betting shops and casinos. Censorship, concerned chiefly in Britain with sexual matters in literary and dramatic production, was challenged in the much publicised *Lady Chatterly's Lover* trial and by 1968 theatrical censorship was removed. The old laws criminalising male homosexuality lost most of their authority following the Wolfenden Report and in 1967 the Sexual Offences Act ensured that, between consenting adults, homosexual practices would no longer be crimes. In the same year David Steel's bill allowing legal, medically controlled abortion became law and shortly afterwards two other pieces of legislation with substantial implications for the patterns of personal and familial relations were put on the statute book. In 1968 the divorce laws in England and Wales were reformed and in 1970 some of the anachronistic and evidently patriarchal elements of the law relating to matrimonial property were removed in a new Matrimonial Property Act.

Informing all these changes was a desire to live life with fewer of those external constraints which appeared to many people, but

especially the young, to be out of date, shaped by religious precepts they no longer acknowledged, imposed by state agents and agencies that themselves seemed often dubious about their value. The 'liberating' motif can be found too in the debates and the legislation relating to a particularly crucial area of institutional reform: to education. Grammar schools, with their traditional emphasis on high scholastic standards for an elite were attacked because they inhibited the potential of those not allowed to attend them. 'Comprehensive' reorganisation was called for in the Labour government's famous circular 10/65. Education at every level from pre-school to university was under scrutiny and expansion in the levels of provision was accompanied by changes in teaching style and curriculum content. New colleges and universities were set up, new programmes of technical and social science study appeared alongside the traditional subjects. Reformed and vastly expanded, the education system it was hoped would provide *positive* freedom for individual citizens and the impetus for a radical modernising of Britain's economy and society.

The 1960s then was a decade of rapidly rising expectations and, not surprisingly, in insidious and occasionally very public and dramatic ways, this was accompanied by challenges to those in authority whether in the home, church, school or college. A variegated youth culture developed and provided in music and dress modes of personal expression signalling diverse kinds of 'opposition'.<sup>14</sup> The events of May 1968 in Paris though, became the most potent symbols of the efforts to contest established relationships and practices. For many young people they continued to shine as beacons of hope, of possibility: for many of their elders, for those in authority, they were no less powerful as symbols of threat.

The legislative changes of the 1960s together with the availability of a radically new form of fertility control – 'the Pill' – plainly had implications for patterns of sexual behaviour and more broadly for marital and gender relations. Through the 1970s the changing role of women – in particular their much more extensive engagement in the paid work force – also produced new circumstances in which some shifts in attitudes and values were likely to occur. On top of this the women's movement stimulated extensive argument about the institution of the family. In the early 1970s feminists, along with a number of well-known psychiatrists were busily attacking 'the middle class myth of love and marriage' and the hurtful, confining and even destructive relationships of the nuclear



family.<sup>15</sup> For them, the legal, economic and cultural changes opened the way for new gender relationships and for alternatives to the 'bourgeois' family.

For those of a conservative cast of mind these cultural developments spelled trouble. Conservatives were quick to connect the rising divorce rate and increasing numbers of single-parent families with the growth of juvenile crime and disorder. To them the alleged breakdown of the family gave cause for concern. Conservative writers pointed to the loss of functions: the bourgeois family was no longer the source of capital formation through savings; the state welfare system had reduced the role of the family in providing for illness, unemployment and old age. It seemed to many on the right that the family as the central institution for the reproduction of society and private property needed to be defended.<sup>16</sup> And their arguments had appealed well beyond any single class.

The reforms and expansion of education also gave rise to reaction on the part of those who felt that 'standards had fallen' that 'more meant worse' and who saw the authority of the school and its ability to shape, control and socialise the young being undermined.<sup>17</sup> Again, there were working-class parents as well as middle-class ones who agreed with some of the arguments of the writers of the Black Papers.

Hard sociological evidence about the nature and extensiveness of cultural changes is less detailed and precise than we might wish, particularly in respect of changes in attitudes and values. It does, of course, show that some new laws had substantial effects. For example, we know that since the Divorce Law Reform Act came into operation in England and Wales in 1971 'the number of divorces doubled, from 80,000 per annum to 159,000 per annum by 1984.'<sup>18</sup> But against that we have to set the fact that most divorcees remarry and for the most part do so quite rapidly. Overall, 'the proportion of people entering marriage has declined only very slightly.'<sup>19</sup> We can see that the illegitimacy rate has risen somewhat in recent years but this hardly constitutes a radical rejection of the nuclear family when we recognise that between 1979 and 1981 81 per cent of families with dependent children were headed by a married couple, while only 2.2 per cent were headed by an unmarried mother as opposed to widows or divorcees.<sup>20</sup> Attitudes to premarital sex may have become somewhat less

ensorious but as Airey's study indicates 'once entered into [marriage] is certainly seen by the great majority of the population to be an exclusive relationship for men and women equally.'<sup>21</sup>

But spokesmen for the New Right from the mid-1970s to the present time, have interpreted the cultural changes and their economic and political accompaniments in ways that have fuelled profound resentments and hostilities and led to a quest for a new and coherent philosophy that would challenge 'the post-war consensus', not only its economic and political aspects but also its liberal and secular morality. Throughout the 1970s, the efforts to construct such an alternative grew, and with Thatcher's electoral success in 1979 it was claimed that a new radicalism could lead to the economic and spiritual revitalisation of Britain. With evangelical zeal the New Right sought to insinuate its beliefs, its world-views into all our major institutions. The 'counter-revolution' was under way.

### **The spectrum of ideas**

Our interest in the so-called New Right began in the mid-1970s when organisations of a specifically petit bourgeois sort were formed, when the Middle Class Association appeared and the National Association for Freedom was set up.<sup>22</sup> An examination of these organisations led us quickly to two general conclusions.

First, that there existed a very tight social network which linked business organisations old and new, government and independent 'think tanks' or research institutes and the main right wing leagues and lobbies. Moreover, the network as we came increasingly to appreciate, was international in character. The same 'intellectual heroes' were drawn upon, invited to meetings and had their portraits on the walls – Hayek and Friedman, of course, being chief among these. Those who had 'struck a blow for freedom' – like Senator Jarvis who led the Proposition 13 campaign in California – were feted abroad as well as at home and directors or principal researchers from one policy institute would be invited to spend time working in another. Together with international conferences and streams of publications – books, journals and newspapers – these devices ensured that the New Right could build and maintain what often seems like an international college for the propagation of their theories and policies.<sup>23</sup> Second, we could see that the New Right was held together in another way – by

three distinctive but interwoven ideological strands – libertarianism, economic liberalism and authoritarian conservatism – all of which played a part in the mobilising of support for diverse right-wing groupings and policies. The materials we gathered though left us in no doubt that the specifically conservative ideas were much the most important of these.

A serious interest in or commitment to libertarianism was rare in our experience of these organisations. It was best represented inside the National Association for Freedom in the early years of that political league's life. Chris Tame, Graham Smith and Charles Page all espoused libertarian ideas. Chris Tame, one-time research officer for the Association, was the most serious advocate of those views. He left and founded the Alternative Bookshop, and although he is still a welcome contributor to the pages of the house-journal, the *Free Nation*, his defence of 'ethical egoism' sits uneasily alongside many of the conservative commitments of the Association.

One or two of the leading lights in the small business associations displayed the passionate individualism, the serious opposition to any but the most minimal forms of state and the rejection of any efforts to promote social justice which are hallmarks of contemporary libertarian thinking. But they were the exceptions. Most small business people, for all that they would inveigh against the role of the state, with its 'excessive' bureaucracy and its unjust impositions, would rarely describe themselves as 'market anarchists' or imagine that their position would be improved other than by forms of state action – action designed to check the power of big business on one side and big unions on the other. But serious libertarians would have grave doubts about the state acting as the protector or promoter of businesses, for they view it critically as

'the paradigm case . . . of an organisation which we have never agreed to join, which we are generally not allowed to leave, and whose services we generally are not allowed to dispense with'<sup>24</sup>

The libertarian perspective on the state went well beyond the misgivings of most of the businessmen and political entrepreneurs.<sup>25</sup>

In addition, very few of the association leaders or politicians we spoke to were happy with libertarian arguments about the rights of individuals to do as they pleased with their own bodies and minds – with the radical notions about being proprietors of ourselves – for

that kind of individualism seemed all too close to the intellectual currents that had changed laws about social, and especially, sexual conduct. And much of that smacked of 'licence' rather than 'freedom' to them.

Libertarianism cannot be located on a 'right wing' – 'left wing' continuum.<sup>26</sup> Its morality of 'rational selfishness' or 'ethical egoism' challenges Conservative and Socialist alike. Although it found a home for a while in the Freedom Association, some of the tensions between libertarianism and the much more pervasive conservatism were clearly displayed in the debate between Michael Ivens, director of AIMS for Industry and Chris Tame carried by the *Free Nation*.<sup>27</sup>

Ivens criticised Tame for making the case for capitalism on the grounds of 'ethical egoism' which meant, in his view, making an *amoral* case for it. Tame, as his replies indicated, believed that 'individuals exist for their own sake,' that the free market is to be defended because it

'provides a framework whereby everyone can work for any personal destiny and live by any moral code (as long as it is not coercive). It is the logical consequence of the ethical egoist, self-ownership axiom.'

Ivens' reasons for defending capitalism were rather different. He sought a *moral* case.

'a creative diffused ownership is necessary for the freedoms in a modern industrial society. I believe that capitalism provides the opportunity for creativeness and prosperity. . . . The appeal of capitalism for me is that it is essential to provide the opportunity for things even more important than capitalism.'

Tame would not countenance that. The rejection of ethical egoism meant that he could

'only accept the morality of slavery, that individuals exist to serve others, or some mythical abstract collectivist good.'

The two positions remained unreconciled.

Economic liberalism, though, had a much better run. Arguments for the creation of the 'social market' economy,<sup>28</sup> one in which free market forces were allowed to operate 'within a human framework

of laws and social services', had, and continue to have, much appeal. Drawing upon the economic ideas presented over many years by the Institute of Economic Affairs, and more recently by the Adam Smith Institute, and on the writings of Hayek and the monetarist theories of Milton Friedman and other American economists, the virtues of the free market were proclaimed. What was needed to stir Britain from its economic torpor was the bracing air of real competition, it was said. State enterprises should be encouraged to put out some of their work to private contractors. Many public concerns should be wholly or partially 'privatised' and stocks of public property – like council houses – should be sold off.

Government, according to this view, had a responsibility to sustain a framework of laws within which private enterprise could flourish and respond to consumer demands. That would mean, among other things, breaking down restrictive practices wherever they were found. Beyond that, government should reform the tax system so as to create greater incentives for the mass of the people to work hard and to save, and for entrepreneurs to take risks, to be innovative and reap their just deserts. Public expenditure was to be tightly controlled so that there could be some diversion of resources to the 'wealth producing' sector. Most important of all though, controlling the supply of money became the principal weapon against the greatest evil allegedly generated by post-war Keynesian economics – inflation.

Several strands of economic theory and philosophy were in fact seized upon by the groups making up the New Right in Britain but there is no doubt that in the late 1970s it was the specifically monetarist ideas that did most to shape policy debates and to develop a comprehensive critique of the post-war consensus. Andrew Gamble in a marvellously succinct and lucid chapter observes that it was Hayek who

'knitted together the monetarist explanation of inflation with a much broader sociological and political account of why it was that governments constantly infringed the principles of a market order. Between them Friedman and Hayek ensured that the debate over monetarism would not stay at the level of macroeconomic models but would re-ignite the debate on the principles of political economy which had seemingly been settled by the triumph of social democracy and the rise of interventionist governments.'<sup>29</sup>

The Freedom Association strove vigorously to disseminate the analyses of Hayek and Friedman and to mobilise support for policies congruent with them. It pressed the arguments for tax reforms and urged the destruction of restrictive practices. It fought legal battles up and down the country to break 'closed shop' arrangements, took individual cases of workers dismissed for their refusal to join unions to the European Court in Strasbourg and engaged in direct action to break strikes as in the Grunwick dispute. Every issue of the journal the *Free Nation* (and at its peak in 1978 it was being published twice each month) offered space to the apologists of the free market. Once a Conservative government was in power, the journal continued to urge tough monetarist policies and directed venomous campaigns against some of those in the Cabinet (like James Prior) who were not true believers in their robust philosophy.

The business groups naturally endorsed inflation control programmes that promised improved chances of profitability, the loosening of the bureaucratic grip of Whitehall and Westminster and the curbing of 'union power'. These after all had been the major objectives of the big business mobilisation of the 1970s.<sup>30</sup> For the small and independent business associations, the promise of tax cuts and repeal of the employment protection legislation went to the heart of the grievances that had prompted their agitation. On basic economic objectives, there was much common ground between NFSE, ASP and other small business associations and between the newer business groups and some of the more established bodies like AIB and the longstanding AIMS for Industry. For the FA and for AIMS, the effort to re-establish competition was not an end itself but a means to the attainment of a host of other 'virtues'. The research centre set up by Sir Keith Joseph and Margaret Thatcher expressed exactly the same point of view.

'The market economy . . . by dispersing economic power throughout society . . . establishes a countervailing force against the concentration of political power, thereby promoting democracy, personal liberty and wider choice of both goods and jobs.'<sup>31</sup>

However, in the broad swell of 'new right' opinion that was finding expression towards the end of the 1970s, there was a deep and powerful stream of ideas which was far removed from the

ethical egoism of the libertarians and distant too from the liberalism of the free marketeers. Something called Radical or neo-Conservatism was much in evidence. It was to be found in the pages of the Daily Telegraph and in the speeches of Enoch Powell; it was articulated by Dr Edward Norman, Dean of Peterhouse, and presented as an academic package in Maurice Cowling's *Conservative Essays* in 1978.<sup>32</sup> While liberals and libertarians gathered under a banner proclaiming 'freedom', the new conservatives rallied to a standard with 'authority' prominent upon it. In 1976 Roger Scruton and other academics, politicians and writers, formed the Salisbury group. Its purpose was to clarify and disseminate specifically conservative ideas, which it was felt, were in considerable danger of being submerged in the new enthusiasm for *laissez-faire* economics. In the first issue of the Salisbury group's journal, we find Ian Crowther writing of a lamentable tendency

'to regard economic liberals, not as mercenaries in a cause which transcends their own, but as adequate representatives of the cause itself.'<sup>33</sup>

And later in the same article,

'the "invisible hand", while it may deliver the goods in the market place, does not automatically deliver the Good in the spheres of culture and morals.'<sup>34</sup>

So, though the neo-conservatives were (and are) generally in favour of the free market, they are clear that competitive capitalism, while it may be quite compatible with their basic ideas, is in no sense a requirement for their vision of the good society. A properly constituted political and moral order would make possible the conditions for free exchange; it would not depend upon it.

What matters above all for the true conservative is the re-establishment of *authority*. Nowhere is this view plainer than in Roger Scruton's *The Meaning of Conservatism*.<sup>35</sup> Unlike the economic liberals, conservatives are not concerned to produce the 'minimal state'. Far from it. They believe that the power of the State needs to be established and maintained and where necessary developed. In their discussions of particular institutions – schools, families, workplaces, for example – the arguments are similar:

relationships of a specifically authoritative kind must be re-asserted. Writing about religion, John Biggs-Davidson<sup>36</sup> tells us that we have heard quite enough about 'horizontal', fraternal religion; what is needed now is a church that speaks with authority, that represents 'vertical' religion.

The neo-conservatives seek the comfort and security of well-ordered hierarchies and of a society characterised by an essential homogeneity. The cultural transformations of the 1960s – breaking down the hierarchies and celebrating diversity – have to be reversed and to do this history must be pressed into service.<sup>37</sup> The way forward is to be illuminated by the glow of an imperial past and in much of the recent writing and conservative rhetoric the idea of 'the nation' is given prominent place. It is used to construct an image of how Britain once was – proud, powerful, united – its people allegiant to the institutions of state, church and family. And that image becomes the point of reference for New Right politicians seeking to mobilise support not only for military operations in the Falklands but for the crusades of moral reconstruction on which they are bent.

The spectrum of ideas upon which the New Right has drawn is evidently broad and its diversity creates much room for inconsistency. Tensions between the different strands of economic and political philosophy were plain enough in the late 1970s during the period of most vigorous political mobilisation.<sup>38</sup> The relationships within and between the various associations we examined demonstrated that. Though the officers of the largest of the small business associations, the National Federation for the Self Employed, concerned themselves chiefly with quite narrowly conceived economic objectives, and espoused a qualified economic liberalism in general, a few showed clearly enough their interest in broader issues and their engagement with the ideological debates. The appeal of neo-conservative ideas about authority and freedom was plainly displayed in one interview.

'Freedom is not applicable to most of society . . . state intervention benefits many people, and you can't expect them to be in favour of freedom. . . . So some form of 'dictation' is necessary. You have to guarantee freedom for those with economic resources so that others can benefit. In society you need a 'controlling power' to guarantee this.'<sup>39</sup>

In their early years the small business associations were highly



volatile. Leaders came and went and though personal ambition might explain much of the conflict there were undoubtedly major differences of view which reflected the ideological diversity of the New Right. There were struggles too between the several recently formed groups, each anxious to recruit members and claim legitimacy through size. Their appeals varied a good deal. ASP for instance, uniquely, claimed to offer the only 'really coherent philosophy' for small business. In fact it offered a melange of libertarian and liberal economic ideas. Attempts were made by the Tory party and by the political league, the FA, to give some direction, to create some unity among the several associations but it was all too plain that in reality this meant 'incorporation' and most sidestepped the embrace of the Conservative's Small Business Bureau or the Freedom Association.

Were there any common elements though that served to cement what were really very different ideological elements? The answer to that is 'yes'. The bonds were made in two quite different ways. First, there were links made by conservative politicians largely through populist rhetoric, where the slogans of libertarians, economic liberals and radical conservatives could be mixed without evident contradiction. Margaret Thatcher's success owes much to her capacity to produce and use such rhetoric. Thus, elements of economic liberalism were encoded in homely images of the domestic economy, libertarian ideas about individual freedom conveyed by talk of 'getting the state off people's backs' and 'encouraging individual responsibility' and neo-conservative moral concerns represented in homilies about the vital significance of the family and the nation.

But the connections existed too at a deeper level. At the heart of much of the 1970s bourgeois discontent lay concern over changing property relations. The welfare consensus of the 1950s and 1960s had produced a very substantial growth of public and collective property of many forms, from nationalised industries and stocks of council housing to the *rights* to economic benefits guaranteed by the state. Correspondingly, the rights of bourgeois property holders had been, in a host of ways, attenuated. The rights of private landlords to dispose of their property, to raise rents, to evict tenants, were hedged about by public rules. Small businessmen complained that, especially after the legislation of the 1970s (the Employment Protection Act, for instance) they could no longer make decisions about the hiring and firing of staff, nor the conditions of service, even the levels of pay – thanks to the efforts

of state and unions. On top of this, of course, there were complaints about how their property was licenced, taxed and subject to various forms of surveillance by officialdom. In their different ways, libertarianism, economic liberalism and radical conservatism addressed the issue of property rights, and from each, disaffected property owners could draw some hope or comfort. The libertarians may have no adequate theory of property, but as Alan Ryan observes, they treat those individual rights which they proclaim as analogous to private property:

'The opening claim is that each person is the owner of himself or herself. We are ours – or rather, each of us is his or hers, and nobody else's.'<sup>40</sup>

Although few wanted to pursue the really radical implications of that, it had, as a slogan, an understandable appeal to many bourgeois individuals who, in the mid 1970s felt 'put upon'. Neo-conservatives look on property as an institution providing the means of self-realisation for individuals and a source of social stability. Scruton's view is that property is the primary relationship through which man and nature come together, and the means whereby man becomes a social being. He disputes the neo-liberal view that property rights are in essence natural rights:

'Property is an institution, requiring realisation and protection in the forms of the state, and a man's right to it is not some overriding law of natural justice, but a right conditional on his own allegiance to the society which made his ownership possible.'<sup>41</sup>

Nevertheless, he is at one with the neo-liberals in his view that freedom can only be guaranteed through the means of private property, in his view through 'possession' rather than 'consumption'. The link between property and freedom is a key dogma of the New Right. It was plainly put in Hayek's early work:

'What our generation has forgotten is that the system of private property is the most important guarantee of freedom, not only for those who own property, but scarcely less for those who do not. It is only because the control of the means of production is divided among many people acting independently that nobody

has complete power over us, that we as individuals can decide what to do with ourselves.<sup>42</sup>

Sustaining freedom, in this view, means defending the conditions for the acquisition and transmission of private property. And that is one reason why, in the ideology of the New Right, 'the family' occupies such an important place, for it provides the site of accumulation and the principal channel of inheritance. But sustaining freedom involves also the handing down of appropriate values and attitudes and the family is also the primary source of these. Depicted in a very traditional, that is to say, patriarchal way, the family thus stands at the intersection of material and moral systems. Many of the reforms of the 1960s, the specific attacks on the modern family, the growth of feminism – all these are seen by the new conservatives as undermining an institution of transcendent, sacred character. In their passionate defences of the institution, in the patriarchal assumptions that underlie their family policies, the New Right find allies at all levels in the class hierarchy. The nuclear family has, after all, been deeply embedded in the structural and ideological fabric of our society.

## **Two fronts in the class war**

The appeal of the New Right is not confined to any one class. The breadth of its critique, the diversity of the ideas which it recruits have ensured that elements of its ideology and practice attract support from diverse sections of the population. Hence its electoral success. But this should not obscure the fact that the New Right is engaged in a class struggle, that it depends upon class consciousness to mobilise political support and sustain its rule. At the heart of the struggle lie real, material interests. Property and property rights constitute the battlefield and that could be clearly seen in the conflicts of the late 1970s. Those associations of small and independent businessmen pressed for the reduction in 'union power', protested against the fiscal impositions of Labour governments whether local or national and shouted 'foul' every time the Wilson or Callaghan administrations put in place legislation that defended or advanced the interests of organised labour. Hostility to the working class, to its institutions, to its collective values was intense.

But businesses large and small also identified another enemy

whose material interests and ideology clashed with their own. They railed against 'bureaucracy' and the legions of public employees, most especially those who served to tax them or to monitor or control the property relations with employees or tenants in which they were enmeshed. The pages of *First Voice* (the NFSE journal) provide ample evidence of this, albeit their criticisms are presented with a good deal less stridency than those found in the short-lived *Counterattack* put out by the Association of Self-Employed People. It was evident, too, that in the Freedom Association there was deep hostility to the bureaucratised middle class which had 'abandoned principle for self-advancement',<sup>43</sup> as one of its campaign directors put it to us. This element of the middle class was untrustworthy because, we were told, its interests lay in the expansion of state property not private property, and in the growth of the state's controlling institutions. Its relationships to the means of production and administration were quite different from those of the more traditional middle class.

This 'new class' could be presented, especially by the radical conservatives, as potentially treacherous – as an 'enemy within'. It is composed, according to one account, of

'lecturers, teachers, NHS bureaucrats, directors of leisure, health education officers, adventure playground leaders, advisers, abortion counsellors, environmental health officers and gay bereavement counsellors'.<sup>44</sup>

What is revealing about this characterisation of the 'new class' is that it identifies those involved not only in the material but also the moral changes of recent years. In the neo-conservative view the post-war consensus has led to social intervention which is illegitimate on both economic and cultural grounds. The advancement of the Welfare State is driven by this new class which has superior access to public services, as well as above average salaries and working conditions. This analysis surfaced in 1983 in the Cabinet's 'Family Policy Group'.

'The concept of the professional, with his claim to unique understanding of his area of practice, when incorporated in a state bureaucracy can also lead to service provision being driven by producers' (i.e. professionals) views of what ought to be provided (e.g. in council housing) rather than consumers' views of what they want.'<sup>45</sup>

What is seized on in the critique of the 'bureaucratised intelligentsia' are different and unacceptable values, material interests which are at odds with those of businessmen, and organisational principles and forms of collective action (such as trades unions and their various means of exerting pressure) which are inimical to bourgeois interests. There is little doubt that the New Right apologists have some bases for their analysis. Anthony Heath and his colleagues in their study of *How Britain Votes*<sup>46</sup> show clearly enough that liberal attitudes towards social policy correlate highly with education. The more educated groups are generally more liberal. Nor can there be any doubt about the propensity of even professionally qualified public sector employees to join unions. Dunleavy<sup>47</sup> among others has shown this. And when Sir Keith Joseph claims that during the 1960s and 1970s there emerged a 'new establishment' which gained cultural supremacy and promoted its ideas and values through all the media we can recognise the overstatement but still concede that the new class *did* win considerable cultural influence – and not only through the media.

This hostility to the 'bureaucratised intelligentsia' is a well-established feature of both neo-liberalism (it prevents the 'market' from working properly) and radical conservatism (it supplants traditional institutions and values). The perceived need to reimpose order leads 'new' conservatives back to some very old ideas in their search for appropriate authority. The neo-conservatives like to argue that God is on their side, that specifically Christian values underpin their attempts to bring about a moral as well as an economic regeneration. It is, in their view, lamentable that so many clergymen 'distort' the mission and message of the Church and adapt their preaching to the ideas of the 'secular intelligentsia'. Thus the views of Dr Edward Norman were summarised by Maurice Cowling in his collection *Conservative Essays*. Cowling wrote that Dr Norman had for some time been telling the Anglican leaders that

**'the secular intelligentsia has no commitment to Christianity, that the higher Anglican clergy have for many generations now been seeing the social implications of Christianity through its eyes, and that a peculiarly emphatic effort is needed to avoid mistaking its assumptions for Christian truth. Too many of the higher clergy, his phrase is are 'guilty public schoolboys' who suppose that they are doing Christ's work when they preach**

socialism, advocate social improvement or give aid and comfort to revolutionaries in Asia, Africa, or South America.<sup>48</sup>

This concern with religion appears at many points. The Freedom Association's newsheet contains a regular religious affairs column ('Pulpit Watch'), NFSE set up a special Synod Sub-Committee 'to monitor the discussion and pronouncements of the Synod.'<sup>49</sup> Some of the leaders of the small business associations have been lay preachers, one of Mrs Thatcher's recently appointed advisors, Professor Griffiths, wrote at some length about the compatibility of monetarism and Christianity<sup>50</sup> and, of course, key figures in the Conservative Party, like Selwyn Gummer, have made very public their deep involvement in church affairs. The New Right has tried (with rather mixed success) to appropriate not only the authority of the established church but also, as Jeremy Seabrook has argued,<sup>51</sup> the traditions of English non-conformism.

Since the mid-1970s, the various elements of the New Right have sought to reimpose on the British working class conditions of traditional subordination – to restore the economic differentials between workers and managers, to reduce state benefits to the poor – in short to increase economic inequalities. And in this they have succeeded. They have endeavoured also to undermine the basis of Labour's political support by reducing the size, power and financial contributions of the trade unions. After seven years of Thatcherism the leaders of the business groups and lobbies take satisfaction from the fact that union membership has fallen and the government has won a conspicuous victory against the miners. There have been 'successes' too on an ideological level for Thatcherism has taken popular discontents – for instance with the bureaucratic welfare state – and encoded these in populist, seemingly libertarian slogans; it has given voice to the misgivings of many working class people about the changes in sexual morality and in a rhetoric ringing with phrases long-familiar in chapel religion, licensed a new puritanism.<sup>52</sup> The ideological work has ensured much popular consent for a programme that greatly increases state power and is deeply hostile to the material interests of manual workers.

The struggles against the new middle class have so far produced no drama on the scale of the NUM strike, but the long-running disputes over the funding of all levels of state education, the protracted teachers' strikes in England and Wales and Scotland, the banning of unions at GCHQ, the prosecutions under the

Official Secrets Act and the continuing stream of criticism of academics and recalcitrant bishops reveal the sustained hostility towards those who do not accept or live exclusively by bourgeois values.

### **The cultural counter-attack**

For more than a decade now we have been witnessing a cultural as well as a political and economic struggle. In the mid-1970s the New Right was a broad movement whose diversity of groups and of ideas was a real benefit in the efforts to mobilise opposition to Labour, the unions, and the post-war consensus. However, it was always likely that one group and one set of ideas would emerge as the dominant ones, and that has happened. The impact of libertarianism has been negligible since Thatcher came to power. Indeed, the fear and suspicion with which it is viewed by the Tory leadership is evident in the recent reaction to the Federation of Conservative Students some of whom claim to be 'libertarians'. Economic liberalism though much lip-service has been paid to it, has not been taken very seriously. What has emerged with growing clarity is the dominance of a conservatism of an increasingly authoritarian kind.<sup>53</sup> Though right-wing groups inside and outside Parliament continue to talk of 'Freedom', the reality is ever deeper penetrations of state power into the everyday lives of citizens.

A major factor promoting this has been the determination of the Thatcherite Tories, and their allies in the lobbies and leagues, to produce a moral as well as an economic revolution. The cultural crusade to displace those ideas and aspirations that underlay the 'liberal-left' alliance and to replace them with 'bourgeois values' has not been easy and has seemed to require more and more direct governmental intervention to support it. Shifting long-established values, obscuring or diverting clearly perceived interests, preventing collective practices fought for and established over almost two hundred years is very hard. It requires coercion. Seeking justification for that the government and its supporters are led closer and closer to the conservatism of the Salisbury group and their clear assertion of the necessity of 'Authority'.

On the pages of the *Free Nation* we find the arguments being rehearsed. In an article entitled 'Freedom and Our Cultural Crisis' the editor of the *Free Nation* invoked the words of Edmund Burke

to support his call for a more authoritarian and hence a more 'free' society:

'Society cannot exist unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without. It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things, that men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters.'<sup>54</sup>

Rising crime, alleged permissiveness and the supposed breakdown of the family are, so the New Right argues, the consequences of our failure to distinguish liberty from licence. If people will not practice 'internal restraint', then it must be imposed by external authority. A permissive culture threatens us in a profound way: it threatens us with totalitarianism because it removes the moral defences of both the individual and of society. That is the view not only of the *Free Nation's* editor but of the Conservative Party's chairman, Norman Tebbit.<sup>55</sup>

Thus, it is the duty of government to reimpose authority and to use its power to rebuild our moral order on a firm, that is to say, bourgeois, basis. If this means more intimate control of schools, colleges and universities, of local government, the health service and the welfare system, so be it. 'Freedom' is, after all, dependent upon the establishment of a prior order. And 'order' is what neo-conservatives in office are seeking.

If the salience and the extensiveness<sup>56</sup> of the cultural counterattack is only slowly being appreciated, that is because it has been obscured by the debate and discussion about economic policies – about monetarism and privatisation. But in reality, the commitment to engineer a profound cultural change has been there since the beginning of the recent quest for a 'radical' conservative approach. Thus, Sir Keith Joseph in 1974 spoke of the precedence the political and moral had over the economic.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, he thought an 'economics-first approach' had aggravated unhappiness and social conflict. The Tory party had lost its way because its original concern with – 'liberties, traditions and morals' – had been forgotten. The nation had to be built on the family and 'civilised values' – bourgeois values, not simply upon the laws of the market place. At the heart of these values – social responsibility, hard work, a desire for self and family betterment, independence of spirit, and rationality – lies private property and the social relations it engenders. The cultural changes can only be accom-



plished by restoring those two basic institutions – the family and private property. Joseph is remarkably close to the Conservative dogmas of Scruton who says:

**‘conservatives have seen the family and private property as institutions which stand or fall together. The family has its life in the home, and the home demands property for its establishment.’<sup>58</sup>**

The point is evidently accepted by most neo-conservatives. Mrs Thatcher prefers to talk of ‘Victorian’ rather than bourgeois values but in the mists of nostalgia for that time when Britain was truly ‘great’ we glimpse the same ideological elements.

**‘Yes, I want to see one nation, as you go back to Victorian times, but I want everyone to have their own personal property stake. Property, every single one in this country, that’s why we go so hard for owner-occupation, this is where we’re going to get one nation. I want them to have their own savings which retain their value, so that they can pass things onto their children.’<sup>59</sup>**

And Mrs Thatcher’s New Year wish for the nation in 1986 was that at the end of it there would be more people of property.

## **Conclusion**

The New Right emerged out of economic and political crises. Those crises were international in character, reflecting the profound problems of capitalism as a world system, reflecting too some fundamental tensions in the politics of western nations. The New Right as a distinctive set of ideological elements and organisations was also international in character though the precise mix of elements and the specific trajectories it took were shaped, inevitably, by the distinctive histories, problems and institutional frameworks of particular societies. The economic crises appeared in the form of inflation, declining profits, recession and the widespread and urgent need for major industrial restructuring. The political crises grew out of the disenchantment of electorates with parties, philosophies and political institutions that seemed ill-adapted to the rapidly changing conditions, needs and

demands of the citizenry. All too often governments appeared impotent in the face of internal conflicts or the externally generated economic problems. There *was* a crisis of legitimacy.

The New Right was born of crisis, but it has been nurtured by a variety of resentments and discontents whose roots lie in structural and cultural changes that in fact developed over the greater part of the post war period. Structural changes altered the balance of class power, creating, at least in Britain, the chance for Labour to hold office for several years but they led ultimately to the erosion of the traditional working-class base for radical politics and to that disarray of the left which so benefited the emerging forces of the right. Cultural changes of the 1960s held out the prospect of more diversity, choice, experiment and personal freedom – more opportunities for many kinds of self-development and expression. Through the years of the long boom many ordinary workers began to enjoy the fruits of consumerism, acquiring the means, the leisure, the security to develop a variety of lifestyles. Both kinds of changes sparked indignation and hostility among some sectors of the ‘middle class’ particularly those who felt their traditional status, perquisites or power to be threatened or usurped. The New Right found fertile ground in which to plant the seeds of its ‘new’ philosophy. Promises of greater freedom, prosperity and order – wrapped in a populist rhetoric – were well received not only by the petit bourgeoisie, not only by some sections of big business but by diverse others, including some among the working class. In the conditions of the mid to 1970s there were many with a little property to conserve, a modest status that was threatened. And there were many too who had good reasons to be critical of a state and its agencies that seemed frequently to be unresponsive or even repressive.

The New Right has had a decade now in which to carry through its project of capturing power and insinuating its views and values into all corners of the state and civil society. The Thatcher governments have installed their placemen in the civil service and the quangos and the new conservatism has penetrated the media, schools, colleges and workplaces. The aim has been very deliberate: to supplant the values of the allegedly dominant liberal – left consensus. The task though is far from complete. It *has* met resistance. The New Right has discovered what some of its number recognised at the beginning of the crusade – that to change values is a difficult task and one that can only be accomplished by

authoritarian means, by the erosion of democracy. The determination of the key activists remains strong and they have by now an infrastructure of research and policy institutes together with leagues and associations that have survived since the mid 1970s. These will enable them to continue the campaigns even if their political flag carriers are defeated at the polls. The struggle to overthrow many of the developments of the post-war years, to restore the bourgeois class, its culture and morality will not be abandoned when Mrs Thatcher closes the door of No 10 behind her.

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- Taking stock after a decade of publication and a decade with Margaret Thatcher leading the Conservative Party the same editor explains the upsurge of crime and civil disorder by arguing that 'Growing affluence and changes in the intellectual climate have encouraged the pursuit of pleasure rather than duty, of self-expression rather than self-discipline, and this has been allied with a growing tendency to deny that there are moral absolutes - especially where sex is concerned. . . . This constellation of attitudes threatens freedom because it destroys the qualities that hold individuals and communities together . . . conservatism should be about the conservation and renewal of the Judeo-Christian heritage which is the basis of all that is best in our civilization' the *Free Nation* 10 (5) October/November 1985.
- 55 N. Tebbit, Disraeli Lecture 'Old Values that will bolster a new freedom' edited version in the *Guardian*, November 15, 1985.

- 56 Not only in economics and in politics but in education, architecture and aesthetics and in popular as well as intellectual forms the ideas of the New Right are being pressed. See for instance R. Scruton *The Aesthetics of Architecture*, London: Methuen, 1979, and Patrick Wright's commentary on this and on the work of architects like Erith and Terry in 'Ideal Homes' *New Socialist* 31 October, 1985.
- 57 K. Joseph 'Britain: a decadent new Utopia', the *Guardian*, 21 October, 1974.
- 58 Scruton, op. cit., p. 101.
- 59 Margaret Thatcher. From the transcript of the Weekend World interview 16th January 1983. Kindly supplied by London Weekend Television.

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