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British Political Thought in the 1990s: Thatcherism, Citizenship and Social Democracy

When attempting to assess the developments in political thought in Britain in the 1990s, the historian is faced with a peculiarly difficult task. This is so for three main reasons. Firstly, the recent nature of the material makes it difficult to achieve the required critical distance necessary for the historian to ascertain which assumptions he shares with both the authors of recent political texts and their audience. This is partly because the historian himself has lived through the period, but also, more particularly, because there has been insufficient time for the relative significance of the ideas being considered to have become apparent. Secondly, if one *were* to hazard a guess as to how developments in political thought in the 1990s will come to be viewed in the future, it seems likely that the decade will be seen as highly transitional one. As we shall see, while the Right struggled to maintain the coherence of its fusion of neo-conservatism and neo-liberalism, as well as to deal with some of the "anomalies" produced by a long period of Thatcherite government, the Left sought to find effective weapons to combat the hegemony of conservative and New Right ideologies in the absence of traditional state socialism, or even egalitarian social democracy. Finally, there is the more basic difficulty of deciding which theoretical texts to select in an age where there is generally a distinct discontinuity between academic political theory and politics as it is fought out in practice. To overcome this difficulty we need to choose judiciously from the evidence spanning the divide – for example pamphlets produced by "think-tanks"[2], articles written by political philosophers, politicians and other commentators in weekly journals, the more intellectually coherent works produced by politicians, and works of political philosophy that have become popular – but such judiciousness is hard to practise this close to the evidence.

However, despite these caveats, it is arguably still quite possible to discern some of the more important trends in British political thought during the last decade. Clearly, there is a huge range of developments we could consider, including those connected with debates over the environment, on sovereignty – as it has been discussed in relation to devolution and the European Union – and on multiculturalism, but, for reasons of space, we will focus here particularly on those connected with autonomy, Thatcherism and citizenship. Even here, it should be noted that this article is far from comprehensive, since it pays comparatively little attention to the more radical claims concerning citizenship made by feminists and those advocating group rights. Nevertheless, at the very least, it can hardly be claimed that

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2 For example, the Institute for Economic Affairs, Politeia and the Centre for Policy Studies on the Right, and the Fabian Society, the Institute for Public Policy Research and Demos on the Left.

the developments described here are not important and significant ones, even if the catalogue is incomplete. Firstly, we will consider in detail how the hegemony of Thatcherism in political discourse was gradually undermined in the course of the 1990s. In the earlier part of the decade, it is argued, Thatcherism proved fairly impervious to criticism in view of the relative sophistication of its ideology and the failure of its Left-inclined critics to provide a compelling alternative. Later the task of reconciling the theory with its effects in practice proved increasingly difficult, although it is noted that some of the most convincing criticisms of Thatcherism are provided by thinkers from the Right (or indeed by historians and political scientists), rather than by the Left. Secondly, we consider the attempts of two particularly distinguished theorists who were nevertheless also highly influential in practice, namely John Gray and Anthony Giddens, to construct an alternative model of citizenship to that of the Thatcherites, treating them as emblematic of the large number of theorists in the early 1990s who sought to do this. It is argued that while both provided telling criticisms of Thatcherism, they both ultimately failed to do this – Gray because he does not question Thatcherite terms and assumptions sufficiently, Giddens because his normative prescriptions are ambiguous, and because it is not clear in any case that they necessarily follow from his sociological analysis. Finally, recent attempts by some on the Left to clarify Giddens's programme and give it more substance by specifying the substantive conditions of equal citizenship are briefly considered.

Interpretations of Thatcherism

It is clearly important to see how different political theorists in the 1990s have viewed Thatcherism, since only by doing so can we understand their respective normative prescriptions. At first sight, given that our focus is the political *thought* of the last decade, it might seem more sensible to concentrate on how coherent theorists considered the theories of the New Right to be. And clearly a consideration of New Right doctrines will form an important part of our analysis. But solely to examine how theorists examined New Right ideology would be to narrow our focus unduly. For such an approach rules out consideration of the possibility that, even if relatively coherent, Thatcherism was a dynamic ideology that was forced to adapt itself not only to unexpected external contingencies, but also to the unintended consequences of its own policies. And this is important, since arguably critics of Thatcherism were only able to disrupt its ideological hegemony effectively once it became clear that its rhetoric was not fully transformed into reality. We will therefore examine firstly how theorists analysed Thatcherism in the 1980s and early 1990s, when they essentially did equate it with New Right ideology, before considering how they responded to Thatcherism more generally, in the later 1990s.

The Early 1990s: Analyses of the New Right

Whatever its effects in practice, the overwhelming majority of the literature on Thatcherism, whether by political scientists, journalists or theorists, and whether descriptive or normative in intention, tended in the 1980s and the early 1990s to equate Thatcherism with the implementation of a New Right ideology.[3] Whilst there were (and remain) a number of sceptics about whether Thatcherism was effective in practice in either radically transforming the institutions of the state or the attitudes of the British people[4], nevertheless such scepticism rarely extended to the point of offering a feasible or novel ideological alternative after the decisive defeat of the Labour Left's radical programme at the 1983 General Election.[5] This was so even amongst most left-inclined critics of Thatcherism who, for obvious reasons, tended to be the keenest to dissect potential New Right contradictions. Perhaps most notably Stuart Hall, who, due to his perceptive delineation of the "hegemonic" nature of Thatcherism became one of its most influential analysts, himself struggled to escape its ideological ascendancy when trying to articulate an alternative. Having stressed that traditional socialism based on class was "exhausted" because "Nobody believes in it any more" and "Its material conditions have disappeared", Hall had little to advocate beyond vague hopes of "a renewal of the whole socialist project in the context of modern social and cultural life" in 1987.[6] Some might have rejected Thatcherism, in short, but few if any questioned the idea that the implementation of a New Right ideology was possible – what they questioned was whether such implementation was desirable, or at most they tried to deny that the dramatic changes affecting Britain had much to do with ideology.

In the absence of a clear alternative, political theorists in the 1980s and early 1990s, particularly if of left-wing sympathies, sought to probe New Right ideology for potential internal contradictions. In general, most – at least tacitly – tended to accept the neo-liberals' argument that social democracy had been a self-undermining project that had inevitably undermined its own aims of equality and full employment and caused a crisis in which over-mighty public sector trade unions took strike action in order to safeguard an over-large welfare state as well as their jobs. The government, they accepted, had suffered from "overload", whilst being simultaneously incapable of exerting itself against the unions.[7] In such a desperate situa-

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3 Cf., (for a more recent example), Richard Heffernan, *New Labour and Thatcherism* (Basingstoke, 2000), p. 46.

4 Cf. in particular, Paul Hirst, *After Thatcher* (London, 1989), David Marsh and R. A. W. Rhodes 'The implementation gap: explaining policy change and continuity' in David Marsh and R. A. W. Rhodes (eds), *Implementing Thatcherite Policies* (Buckingham, 1992) and Ivor Crewe, 'Has the Electorate become Thatcherite?', in Robert Skidelsky (ed.), *Thatcherism* (London, 1988).

5 A few might dispute this claim. Cf., for example, Perry Anderson, 'A Culture in Contraflow', in idem, *English Questions* (London, 1992), especially pp. 196–197.

6 Cf. Stuart Hall, 'Gramsci and Us', in idem, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (London, 1988), pp. 172–173.

7 For contemporary analyses of this kind, cf., *inter alia*, Anthony King (ed.), *Why is Britain becoming so hard to govern?* (London, 1976) and Isaac Kramnick (ed.), *Is Britain Dying? Reflections on the Current Crisis* (London, 1979).

tion, they further accepted, the only solution had been strong leadership by a government willing both to reduce the functions of the state through deregulation and privatization, but also to re-establish the state's authority against the illicit power of unelected groups, in order to safeguard individual liberties. Nevertheless, they raised two queries. Firstly they pointed out that according to New Right arguments the state's role was both meant to diminish, to enable the economy to become more efficient and productive, but also to increase, to enable it to conquer "unrepresentative" special interest groups. Secondly, and more seriously, it was argued that there was a potential contradiction between the New Right's neo-liberal arguments, the purpose of which was to increase the negative liberty of individuals, and its neo-conservatism. For a crucial part of New Right ideology was not simply to argue that state intervention in the economy decreased individual free choice, but that it had a negative effect on character, undermining an individual's capacity to act *morally*, to value traditional ties to their community, nation and, especially, their family.[8] On this view, what was especially reprehensible about social democracy was not its advocacy of the restraint of the market by the state, but its supposed symbiotic relationship with the libertarian values of the 1960s.

However, although both of these criticisms identified potential ambiguities within the New Right, neither of them really succeeded in causing Thatcherism ideological difficulties in practice. The first pinpointed a disagreement between New Right neo-liberals as to whether any form of state intervention (and particularly taxation) should be regarded as coercion. Clearly, if Thatcherites could have been identified with such an extreme position, then this would have caused them a good deal of damage. But in fact, on this point, they tended rather to draw upon Hayek's arguments, which posited a sharp distinction between state intervention to protect civil and political rights (such as a right to life and a right not to be injured) and social and economic rights where there is a limited set of resources to be distributed. The state, in short, was quite right to intervene to ensure the negative liberty of individuals against illicit coercive bodies such as trade unions, but quite wrong to attempt to equalize their positive rights to resources, both because this is impossible to do epistemically, and also because it inevitably harms the productivity of the market. In the circumstances of the 1980s, a high degree of intervention by the state was thus necessary, but this was only to restore the proper balance of liberties; later, it was claimed, the state's powers could safely contract. Such a position was to prove highly effective in practice at rebutting critics, despite some sophisticated philosophical criticism.[9]

Secondly, the attempt at showing that Thatcherism's commitment to individualism conflicted with its advocacy of traditional institutions such as the family also proved ineffective. This was partly because in the 1980s and early 1990s advocates of Thatcherism were still able to convince enough of their electoral audience that excessive taxation, trade union power and local government institutions were greater threats to individuals' liberty than the corrosive ef-

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8 For arguments of this sort, cf. Roger Scruton, *The Meaning of Conservatism* (London, 1980) and Maurice Cowling (ed.), *Conservative Essays* (London, 1978).
9 For example, cf. Raymond Plant, 'Citizenship and Rights' in Raymond Plant and Norman Barry, *Citizenship and Rights in Thatcher's Britain: Two Views* (London, 1990), especially pp. 22–26.

fects of the free market. However, it was also because, as Alison Jeffries and Michael Freeden[10] have demonstrated, Thatcherism was less crude theoretically than some of its critics have argued. According to their arguments, Thatcherism should not be identified as an unstable "populist" mixture of "the resonant themes of organic Toryism … [and] the aggressive themes of a revived neo-liberalism".[11] Nor should it be seen *simply* as a one-off attempt at restoring the balance between individual liberties and the state, albeit that such an account has considerable explanatory power. Rather, Thatcherism was premised upon the traditional conservative idea that, in the absence of interference, individuals are prone to anti-social impulses which, though of enormous positive benefit within the market, in general have to be restrained. This could only be done effectively, argued the Thatcherites, by traditional institutions such as the churches, voluntary organisations and the family, and by the shared traditional social norms that went with them. It could not be done self-consciously by the state, since the embodied wisdom and experience of traditional institutions could not be reproduced by bureaucratic "rationalist" institutions.[12] Rather than simply choosing an incoherent set of ideological themes chosen at random from neo-liberal and neo-conservative traditions, therefore, Thatcherism was in fact able to fuse them together into a highly sophisticated synthesis, reinvigorating what was fundamentally a conservative position with arguments culled from neo-liberal ideologues. The result proved extremely effective at rebutting criticism of Thatcherite "incoherence", at least well into the early 1990s.

The Later 1990s: Critiques of Thatcherism

If, as argued above, Thatcherism was able not merely to maintain ideological hegemony during the 1980s and early 1990s, but also possessed quite a high degree of theoretical coherence, then in the mid and late 1990s it was nevertheless to face increasingly sophisticated and effective challenges. In particular, these challenges presented themselves on three fronts, and we will consider each of them in turn. Firstly, and most radically, political scientists and theorists once again began to question whether unrestrained free-market capitalism was consistent with the maintenance of traditional civic institutions. What was new about these criticisms, however, and gave them new bite, was not only that they were based on experience, but also, strikingly, that they were at least as likely to come from the political Right as from the Left. In particular, John Gray, who had earlier been a leading academic advocate of the neo-liberal New Right, and who had written an important article defending the position that liberty could be defined as maximizing free choices[13], mounted increasingly strong attacks on a neo-liberal ideology that refused to admit that market institutions were in need of any restraint.

10 Cf. Alison Jeffries, 'British Conservatism: Individualism and Gender', *Journal of Political Ideologies* 1 (1996), 33–52, and Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 383–399 and pp. 408–414.

11 Stuart Hall, 'The Great Moving Right Show' in Hall, *Hard Road,* p.48.

12 For a classic statement of this argument, cf. Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (London, 1962).

13 John Gray, 'On Negative and Positive Liberty', *Political Studies* 28 (1980), 507–526.

Thus in his collection of essays, "Beyond the New Right", he was content to argue merely for the primacy of traditional civic institutions over the market, arguing that "The political legitimacy of the free market depends on these institutions being in good repair and, where necessary, on their being tended and nurtured by government".[14] By the time he came to write 'The Undoing of Conservatism', however, he was adamant that " … the principal danger to liberal civilization … in the 1980s and 1990s … has come from … hubristic liberal ideology"[15], blaming Conservative governments for "an epidemic of crime" and "the growth of many forms of poverty".[16] Moreover, not only did Gray break with Thatcherite ideology by blaming social problems on a liberal-utopian view of free market capitalism rather than on the pernicious effects of sixties libertarianism, he also confirmed this break by arguing that it was impossible to return to a situation where one (traditionalist) lifestyle was to be regarded as morally superior.

Secondly, even those on the Right who believed that highly deregulated markets could in principle co-exist with vibrant civic institutions, such as David Willetts and David Green, expressed concern about how Thatcherism had operated in practice. Despite challenging Gray's assertion (which was repeated by many on the Left) that it was the unrestrained operation of the free market that had done irreparable damage to local institutions, Willetts nevertheless conceded that damage had been done. According to the latter, however, the problem was not the fostering of a rampant individualism and resultant *anomie*, but rather the impact of over-regulation. The setting up of regulatory bodies to assess the efficiency of local services, in other words, although designed to increase accountability, had in fact damaged civic institutions, since the regulation was heavy-handed. Indeed, such had been the obsession with assessing services according to nationally set "performance indicators" under the Thatcher and Major governments, Willetts conceded, that "the pernicious effect of heavy-handed regulation on local voluntary groups is [now] greater than ever".[17] Likewise, David Green, although prepared to admit (like Gray) that Thatcherism had erred in over-emphasizing the importance of wealth-accumulation over maintaining civic institutions – that "Its language was … too guided by the peculiar materialism … which sees people as 'utility maximizers'"[18] – nevertheless also maintained that the main problem with Thatcherism was its penchant for centralized regulation.[19] If Green's programme remained fundamentally a Thatcherite one, then, since he believed that a highly deregulated economy was compatible with the maintenance and revivification of traditional institutions, nevertheless the scale of deregulation and

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14 John Gray, 'A Conservative Disposition', in idem, *Beyond the New Right* (London, 1993), p. 60.
15 John Gray, 'The Undoing of Conservatism', in John Gray and David Willets, *Is Conservatism Dead?* (London, 1997), p. 9.
16 Ibid., p. 6.
17 David Willetts, 'Civic Conservatism' in Gray and Willetts, *Conservatism*, p. 128.
18 David G. Green, *Reinventing Civil Society: The Rediscovery of Welfare Without Politics* (London, 1993), p. 132.
19 Cf. Ibid., p. 133.

privatisation of social institutions that he advocated represents a sharp critique of Thatcherism as it had operated in practice.[20]

Finally, the later 1990s increasingly saw a fundamental questioning of what has been termed "the Thatcherite narrative", namely the account that Mrs Thatcher and her followers gave of how her government came to power in 1979.[21] Central to this account was the claim that there had been an unhealthy consensus between the two major political parties since the Second World War (or at least since the fall of the Attlee government in 1951) to pursue social democratic policies of full employment (using Keynesian techniques to intervene in the economy) and a high degree of equality (by providing generous welfare services, funded through general taxation). Not only, Thatcherites argued, had this encouraged dependency on the state, since those on welfare benefits had had little incentive to look for work, it also led to increasing economic inefficiency.

Increasingly, however, this account came to be queried in the later 1990s. In particular, historians and political scientists started to question three of its premises. Firstly, historians began to doubt the degree to which there had ever truly been a consensus between the Conservative and Labour parties between 1945 and 1979. For even when pursuing ostensibly similar Keynesian policies in the 1950s and more dirigiste ones in the 1960s, the aims of each party were, they argued, mostly quite distinct.[22] Thus the Conservatives tended to favour price control and increased productivity over high social spending and greater equality; Labour the reverse. If true, then such accounts make a Thatcherite narrative considerably less plausible, at least to the extent of querying Thatcherism's breathtaking novelty. Secondly, while they tended to admit that some kind of readjustment between the forces of capital and labour was necessary in the 1970s, political scientists became far more sceptical about the claim that Thatcherism was the only possible solution to the problems that social democracy was facing. Rather, they emphasized that the change in the nature of the labour market, and the change in the nature of the international economic environment in the 1970s were not *intrinsic* problems of British social democracy, but were rather external to it. Furthermore, they increasingly stressed the active role that Thatcherites played in narrating the "Winter of Discontent" as social democracy's terminal crisis, in order to justify the perceived harshness of their solutions, rather than simply accepting such descriptions as empirical and incontestable. Crucially, too, they emphasized the inability of earlier analysts (such as Stuart Hall) to free themselves from the Thatcherites' ideological matrix, even when identifying precisely this phenomenon. Peter Kerr, for example, has argued that, whilst Hall was fully aware of

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20 Cf. Ibid., pp. 138–152.

21 For Mrs. Thatcher's conviction that such a consensus was to blame for British economic decline, cf. Hugo Young, *One of Us* (London, 1989), p. 224.

22 There are now a large number of works arguing for this position. Cf., in particular, Harriet Jones and Michael Kandiah (eds), *The Myth of Consensus: New Views on British History 1945–1964* (Basingstoke, 1996), Peter Kerr, *Postwar British Politics: From Conflict to Consensus* (London, 2001), and E. H. H. Green, 'Thatcherism: An Historical Perspective', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th series, 9 (1999), 17–42.

Thatcherite attempts at narrating the "Winter of Discontent" as a crisis, nevertheless his own analysis " … paid too much credence to Thatcherism's attempts to reconstruct the history of the postwar period into an account which emphasised the dominance of social democracy, collectivism and statism at an institutional and policy level".[23] The result of such accounts has been to inspire considerable scepticism both about whether British difficulties in the 1970s were really essentially caused by social democratic failure, and therefore also as to whether Thatcherism truly represented the only solution. And indeed, finally, the very proposition that Thatcherism represented a solution even to the very economic problems that it had set itself came increasingly under fire in the later 1990s. In particular it was argued that the de-regulation of core state functions restricted the ability of the Thatcher and Major governments to harness the power of the state in order to secure the right conditions for renewed economic growth.[24] Whilst such arguments of course remained (and remain) highly controversial, their very existence is evidence of a significant undermining of the Thatcherite hegemony.

Political Thought in the Earlier 1990s: Normative Prescriptions for Autonomy and Citizenship

Thus far, we have sought to delineate the way in which political scientists' and theorists' diagnoses of Thatcherism evolved during the course of the 1990s. As has been argued, such a task is in itself an important exploration of the political thought of the last decade. This was so because Thatcherism was such a dominant and all-pervasive ideology and such a recent phenomenon in the 1990s, that any diagnosis of it would almost inevitably carry clues as to the normative orientation of the analyst in question. But we have also discovered that the coherence and sustainability of Thatcherism as an ideology was increasingly questioned as the 1990s proceeded, and in these circumstances it is not surprising that theorists became more self-confident about putting forward alternatives to the Thatcherite programme.

In this section we will examine an important current of thought in the early 1990s which sought to provide an alternative to Thatcherite nostrums, one that sought to emphasize the importance of reinvigorating civil society, and the associated virtue of citizenship. For, despite various differences in approach and in ideological background, it is arguably still significant that a large number of theorists and politicians began to appeal to the term in the early 1990s. This can be seen in particular by considering two thinkers who were at the forefront of advocating the revitalisation of civil society in the early 1990s, namely John Gray and An-

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23 Kerr, *Postwar British Politics*, p. 201.
24 Cf. Kerr, *Postwar British Politics,* p.196 and Hay, *Re-Stating Social and Political Change* (Buckingham, 1996), p. 171. Both of these authors are indebted on this point to the work of Bob Jessop. Cf. Jessop, 'From Social Democracy to Thatcherism', in N. Abercrombie and A. Warde (eds), *Social Change in Contemporary Britain* (Cambridge, 1992) and 'The Transition to Post-Fordism and the Schumpeterian Workfare State', in R. Burrows and B. Loader (eds), *Towards a Post-Fordist Welfare State?* (London, 1994).

thony Giddens. Both professed to reject the Thatcherite project, both in terms of its support for "traditional" values, and in terms of its support for a highly deregulated free market. They rejected an espousal of "traditional" values on the basis that such a political programme would be coercive (and unsustainable) in modern Britain, leading at worst to fundamentalism, and at best to farce, since values and lifestyles had changed so much. And, though differing on the issues of globalization, they also rejected the New Right commitment to an unrestrained free market, on the basis that this would inevitably damage civil society (and hence individual autonomy) rather than being empowering, as the Thatcherites claimed. Importantly, in other words, both Gray and Giddens went some way in distancing themselves from the neo-liberal picture of the individual as, above all else, a consumer. However, on the other hand, they were at pains to distance themselves from traditional social democracy. This was in particular because both saw the British welfare state as, to some extent, a failure. For rather than seeing it (as T. H. Marshall famously did) as an effective means of granting the social rights necessary for full citizenship[25] – in addition to the civil and political rights that protect negative liberties – Gray and Giddens saw it rather as an *ad hoc* compromise between antagonistic classes[26], and as necessary for a state seeking to wage the Cold War. Furthermore, they argued that the centralised "statist" nature of the welfare state prevented it from being either properly democratically accountable, or (on a related point) capable of adapting to changing socio-economic circumstances. In these new circumstances, they argued, one could no longer assume either a conventional family structure (with a male breadwinner) or stable patterns of employment, and hence a system of centrally controlled benefits was no longer applicable. And finally, they argued, though Thatcherites had exaggerated its effects and pervasiveness, the practice of granting people welfare benefits without responsibilities had indeed encouraged the poor and unemployed to become passive and dependent, rather than active citizens.

Now clearly that Gray and Giddens were substantively in agreement on these points is significant, since what we have identified here is sufficient to delineate something of a common position on the importance of active citizenship, and the need to reinvigorate civil society. And this is important, since although there is now something of a consensus that there was a very wide interest in the idea of citizenship in the early 1990s, it has also been noted that this term concealed a number of differing, indeed divergent meanings.[27] Thus for some on the right, such as Douglas Hurd, it in fact represented an appeal for the retention of the traditional, deferential value of "service"[28], whilst to others it simply indicated a determination to ensure that consumers gained fair treatment when purchasing goods and services. For some on the Left, by contrast, such as Raymond Plant, to be meaningful citizenship implied a much more substantive degree of equality, since otherwise it could not really be claimed that citizens had

25 Cf. T. H. Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Class: and Other Essays* (Cambridge, 1950) and *Class, Citizenship and Social Development*: E*ssays* (Chicago, 1963).
26 Cf., for example, Anthony Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right: The Future of Radical Politics* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 149.
27 For clarification of some of these, cf. David Marquand, 'Reinventing Civic Republicanism' in idem, *The New Reckoning: Capitalism, States and Citizens* (Cambridge, 1997).
28 Cf. Douglas Hurd, 'Citizenship in the Tory Democracy', *New Statesman* 29 (April, 1988).

the same rights.[29] Clearly, therefore, that Gray and Giddens genuinely share points in common is important, and all the more so since they come from differing ideological backgrounds, Gray, as previously indicated, from the Thatcherite Right, and Giddens from the social democratic Left. Nevertheless it is important not to exaggerate the degree of consensus between the two: there remained important differences between them, even if these were not always reducible to a simple Left/Right divide. In the following sections we will examine both how coherent their positions were, and also, in particular, how successfully they provided an alternative to Thatcherite assumptions based on a greater commitment to citizenship, and a renewal of civil society.

An Apostate Free Marketeer: John Gray

Although his position has altered significantly over the course of his career, in that he has become increasingly critical of the effects of the free market on civil society, and even more of the tenets of neo-liberals who claim that market values are self-sustaining, there is no doubt that, at its core, Gray's position has retained a great deal of consistency. Drawing especially on the work of two political philosophers, namely Michael Oakeshott and Joseph Raz[30], Gray has constantly sought to defend a conception of individual autonomy as the basis for human freedom, at least in a British political and social context. If he has become more pessimistic about the potential negative effects of the free market on civil society, then his fundamental premise – that individuals only truly have autonomy if they have access to a rich diversity of civil institutions and that, conversely, civil society is only sustainable if there exist such individuals to sustain it – has remained remarkably constant. So although a high degree of liberty from the state is certainly necessary for the pursuit of autonomy, it is not, as classical liberals claim, enough. And thus although market institutions are not inimical to the maintenance of autonomy, in other words – indeed they "depend upon and reward autonomy-based virtues"[31] – they are not by any means *sufficient* for its maintenance, even if combined with the common set of rules to protect negative liberties that Hayek advocated. On the contrary, Gray argues, "… the transmission of freedom and individuality across the generations … presupposes a common culture – a shared culture of liberty and responsibility."[32] – in other words a set of civil institutions embodying the wisdom of tradition that cannot be produced by conscious effort. Such a set of institutions will, however, be highly diverse, partly because otherwise individuals' effective autonomy will be limited, but more especially because in Britain they are "members of many and sometimes conflicting communities".[33] Thus although Gray is clear that there will, in practice, be limits to the diversity that the community can tolerate, indeed to the extent that laws can be

29 Cf. Plant, 'Citizenship and Rights', and Raymond Plant, 'Citizenship, Empowerment and Welfare', in Ben Pimlott, Anthony Wright and Tony Flower (eds), *The Alternative* (London, 1990).
30 Cf. Oakeshott, *Rationalism*, and Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct* (Oxford, 1975); Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford, 1986).
31 John Gray, 'The Moral Foundations of Market Institutions' in idem, *New Right*, p. 80.
32 Gray, 'A Conservative Disposition', p. 55.
33 Ibid., p. 57.

passed "to resist pluralism when pluralism threatens the norms of civil society itself"[34], nevertheless he is at pains to stress the relatively minimal nature of the values that the community needs to have in common to exist. Whilst a set of common rules is not enough, in other words, the pursuit of a fully organic community is positively "delusive" and distracts from "the humbler but indispensable task of filling out that thinner common culture of respect for civil society that presently enables people to co-exist in peace".[35]

Now crucial to Gray's position is that our reliance on tradition is such that it is not possible to establish abstract principles to determine the limits of autonomy, rejecting a number of plausible candidates including libertarianism, egalitarianism and even justice – on the basis that the latter should be seen as "… a set of reciprocities whereby we achieve a *modus vivendi*, not an ideal specified in terms of rigorist principles".[36] And thus he is hostile to any idea of fundamental rights, either of a negative or positive sort, since the former inevitably have to be compromised against one another, whilst the latter, he argues, are insensitive to the differences that exist both between and within societies. Rather, therefore, the state has a duty to promote autonomy, both indirectly through sustaining civil society (by, for example, adequate funding of public services) and directly through welfare provision, but these duties cannot be specified precisely in advance. However, Gray nevertheless believes that it is possible to specify a certain number of basic needs necessary (if not always sufficient) for autonomy, and also, crucially, believes that most (though not all) are *satiable*.[37] This enables him to specify more precisely what government should do in practice, at least to the extent of giving priority to basic needs over other calls on resources.

Now Gray's claims about the satiability of basic needs are controversial and complex, and we do not have the space to consider them in detail here. Rather, we need to focus on the degree to which Gray's arguments truly provide a coherent alternative to Thatcherite assumptions about the relationship between individual and civil society. For arguably there are two reasons, despite his clear break with some of Thatcherism's precepts, to maintain that he does not. Firstly, despite his constant declaration that a commitment to individual autonomy and a strong civil society are mutually supportive, it is clear that Gray ultimately gives conceptual priority to individuals. Thus toleration should not be granted to different groups within society, but to individuals[38], whilst despite his stress on the necessity of having a rich range of civic institutions, Gray ultimately believes that welfare benefits are often best provided by means of individual allocation, for example by vouchers.[39] But this makes it difficult to see how, without individuals having a more definite stake in local civic institutions (such as, for

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34 Ibid., p. 59.
35 Ibid.
36 Gray, 'The Moral Foundations', p. 103.
37 By this Gray means that once such needs are met, "… the content of the welfare claim which guarantees their satisfaction is exhausted". Cf. Gray, 'The Moral Foundations', p. 106. Gray's analysis – as he admits – leans heavily on that of Raz here: cf. Raz, *Morality*, p. 242.
38 Gray, 'A Conservative Disposition', pp. 58–59.
39 For an argument that education vouchers would not work even on a self-interested basis, cf. Brian Barry, 'The Continuing Relevance of Socialism', in Skidelsky (ed.), *Thatcherism*, p. 150.

example, schools), a genuine communal commitment to such institutions is to be maintained. Secondly, although Gray differs from Thatcherites in becoming increasingly worried about the negative effects that unfettered capitalism can have on civic institutions, what really causes the damage, according to him, is an unthinking espousal of neo-liberal *ideology*, rather than the impact of markets *per se*. And thus his critique ultimately remains an idealist one, as does his solution – which is to rediscover the proper attitude to the relationship between markets and civil society. No ground is given, in other words, to the argument that the impact of markets is so pervasive that major changes in the way society is structured are needed if civil society is to be revivified, let alone to the argument that civic institutions have been so affected by market techniques that the terms "state", "markets" and "civil society" are in need of redefinition. In these circumstances it is not surprising that Gray lacks solutions to the (self-imposed) problem to how to deal with the interpenetration of civil society by markets: he remains too prey to Thatcherite assumptions.

The Third Way: Anthony Giddens

By contrast Anthony Giddens, although critical of the effects that unrestrained free market capitalism has had on civil society, as indeed he is of some of the effects of the "traditional" social democratic welfare state, regards Gray's project of basing normative prescriptions on the goal of maximizing an individual's autonomy as not only too individualist, but also too parochial. Rather than concentrating on the immediate political consequences of Thatcherism, normative prescriptions must be based on a more sociological analysis of what has happened to British society, since profound changes to its structure have recently occurred. According to Giddens, the ultimate cause of these changes is globalization. Globalization, he argues, should not be seen simply as an economic phenomenon, or even as the creation of large-scale, trans-national systems, but rather as a complex set of changes that transform societies on a personal as well as an institutional level, because increasingly societies are have become so inter-connected with one another, not least through mass instantaneous communication. This in turn has two important large-scale consequences, namely that the way in which societies conceptualise tradition is radically altered and that, secondly, individuals within them become more socially reflexive. By this Giddens means that because whenever individuals commit themselves to a course of action, they can no longer rely on a set of inherited traditions to follow in different spheres of their lives. Rather, they have to make conscious decisions about which tradition to follow *within* a particular sphere, for example when deciding what kind of family life is desirable for their particular situation. In such circumstances, traditions can no longer justify themselves, and if an attempt is made to uphold traditions that have been widely discredited, the result is simply fundamentalism. Furthermore, individuals become aware that their actions are not simply set against the background of a social or natural reality – they are in fact *constitutive* of that reality. In such circumstances,

Giddens claims, the bureaucratic model of the state as articulated by Max Weber – which is based upon the idea of one central directive body – can no longer be the most efficient, since it will be inadequately responsive to the needs of highly diverse and reflexive citizens.[40]

A number of conclusions follow from these developments, according to Giddens. In particular, since both conservatism and social democracy rely upon there being relatively stable traditional forms of life, these political ideologies have been rendered obsolete. Conservatism does so simply because its aim is to preserve certain substantive traditions, while social democracy does so since otherwise it cannot promote equality by redistribution reliably. For if the state (or other body) cannot rely on individuals' socio-economic circumstances remaining the same, Giddens argues, then attempting to produce greater equality by simple redistribution is likely to fail, especially if attempted by a bureaucratic state that attempts to impose it from the top. And despite his rejection of conservatism and socialism, this does not mean that Giddens is inclined to support any form of Thatcherite neo-liberalism either. Neo-liberalism, he maintains, for similar reasons to Gray, is inherently unstable: it both "depends upon the persistence of tradition for its legitimacy", but is also "a prime force promoting … [the] very disintegrative forces"[41] that undermine it. However, Giddens argues, although the solution to the current situation certainly involves enhancing autonomy, this process cannot be conceived in the way Gray states. For, crucially, autonomy must not be regarded as egoistic but rather must rely intrinsically on reciprocal, interdependent relationships with others. And in order to do this effectively it is not enough to try to sustain a set of civic institutions that are immunized against the selfishness of market behaviour, of "protecting social cohesion around the edges of an egoistic marketplace"[42], as Giddens puts it. Rather, since civil society, markets and the state are all inextricably intertwined, the "issue of reconstructing social solidarities … should be understood as one of *reconciling autonomy and interdependence* in the various spheres of social life, including the economic domain".[43] And Giddens sees evidence that such autonomy is increasingly possible, citing the fact that although younger adults do not seek to connect morals to tradition, and choose more individualist lifestyles, this does not prevent them from upholding socially responsible norms – such as upholding ecological values, human rights and sexual freedoms in particular.[44] Instead of seeing their position as immoral (as conservatives have tended to do) or either anti-political or in some way linked to neo-liberalism (as social democrats have tended to do), Giddens argues that we see it as evidence of a new cosmopolitan globalized morality.

Now it is clear that to some extent Giddens's account offers an important alternative to a Thatcherite position. Rather than arguing that freedom must be defined as a sphere free from the state, he argues it has a positive role to play in promoting autonomy. Rather than simply

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40 For a detailed description of these changes, cf. Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right*, especially chapters 1, 2 and 3.
41 Anthony Giddens, 'Brave New World: The New Context of Politics', in David Miliband (ed.), *Reinventing the Left* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 26.
42 Giddens, 'Brave New World', p. 29.
43 Ibid.
44 Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy* (Cambridge, 1998), p. 36.

accepting the categories of "individual", "market" and "civil society", he argues for their re-definition. Rather than claiming that we must either reject traditional values wholesale or accept them, he argues that individuals have a plurality of moral practices to choose from. But there are also several problems with Giddens's position, both in theory and in practice. Theoretically, whilst it is clear that Giddens has identified an important sociological trend towards an increase in reflexivity and cosmopolitan values, it is open to question whether such a trend is irreversible, or indeed whether it has been the most important one in British society in the 1990s. More polemically, one might say that Giddens invites the charge that he is confusing descriptive with normative perspectives: just because there is a tendency towards the kind of autonomy that Giddens envisages, in other words, does not make it inevitable. Furthermore, one is struck by the optimism of Giddens's account with regard to the interventions of the market in the sphere of individual autonomy, and how sanguine he is about the prospect of business corporations reforming themselves to become more socially responsible (hence furthering such autonomy).[45] Whilst he is clearly right to question the view that the interventions of the free market on civil society will always be negative, nevertheless his confidence that the two can be relatively easily reconciled is one that has been fiercely disputed, not least by a fellow theorists on the centre-left, such as Paul Hirst. Hirst's position resembles Giddens's in that he is highly critical of bureaucracy, whether it occurs in the public or private sectors, and believes, like Giddens, that more flexible and responsible forms of organization are urgently necessary, not least to ensure that welfare payments are empowering, rather than encouraging dependence on the state. Moreover Hirst is critical, like Giddens, of the conservative, Thatcherite idea that civil society is a spontaneous order separate from government.[46] Thus far the two thinkers are in agreement. But Hirst is far less sanguine than Giddens that the situation can easily be remedied, since rather than genuine reform of traditional bureaucratically organised public services, the years of Thatcherite government actually saw the proliferation of "quangos" and other undemocratic institutions.[47] The effect of an increased role for the free market on the institutions of civil society has thus been to exacerbate the problem of their unaccountability, and major structural reform is necessary to rectify this. If Hirst himself does not arguably provide very convincing solutions to this problem, admitting that "the job of re-building firms as more democratic … is very difficult"[48], then there is no doubt that he identifies a significant difficulty in Giddens's position.

More practically, despite suggesting a number of measures to revitalize civil society and to ensure the maintenance of a vibrant public sphere, arguably here too Giddens is guilty of over-optimism. Suggesting that the public sphere can be revitalized by greater democratic scrutiny of the executive, greater support for non-traditional kinds of family, increasing social inclusion and, in general, by emphasizing that citizens do not have rights without re-

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45 Cf. Ibid., p. 107.
46 Cf. Paul Hirst, 'Democracy and Civil Society' in idem, *From Statism to Pluralism* (London, 1997), p. 117.
47 Cf. Paul Hirst, 'Quangos and Democratic Government' in idem, *Statism*.
48 Ibid., p. 109.

sponsibilities,[49] his position nevertheless fails sufficiently to address sources of potential conflict and disagreement. It remains unclear, for example, what the criteria are to be used for allocating resources to healthcare, and at what level of governance such decisions should be taken – advocating the discussion of health care "in a wide sense"[50] (so that the general needs of society are taken into account, and preventative medicine given more attention) is no doubt admirable, but it does not solve this problem. Equally, whilst curbing environmental pollution will no doubt be a "general benefit"[51] in the long term, this still leaves unanswered the question of how much regulation there should be, and which level of government should be in charge of it. And one wonders how Giddens's advocacy of a society that is less dominated by the work ethic squares with his exhortations to business competitiveness.[52] So although Giddens's work in some ways marks an important break with the Thatcherite legacy, and offers a number of suggestions as to how to reinvigorate civil society, there are also clear reasons to doubt whether his position is fully coherent. At the very least his solutions remain under-specific.

Political Thought in the Later 1990s: A Return to Social Democracy?

In retrospect, as we have seen, one of the most striking things about those seeking to criticize Thatcherite arguments by urging the revitalization of civil society and the restoring of the proper conditions for citizenship in the earlier 1990s was their determination to concentrate on means of doing so that distanced themselves from traditional "social democratic" solutions. In particular, rather than emphasizing the necessity of equality for securing autonomy, political theorists preferred to stress the importance of maintaining vibrant civic institutions, increasing democratic accountability and (at most) preventing social exclusion. It is true that they differed somewhat over precisely why they rejected full-scale egalitarianism, and downplayed the importance of distributive justice – thinkers from the Right preferring to stress the theoretical impossibility of ever achieving equal starting conditions; thinkers from the Left tending rather to emphasize the difficulty of finding fair criteria to use in practice to distribute equally in a highly diverse society no longer predominantly organized on class lines. Furthermore, it is of course also true that there were always some exceptions to this general rule, Raymond Plant being perhaps the most important.[53] Thus in 1990 Plant wrote that the poor " … can be empowered only if their position is improved relative to the rich"[54], since power is essentially a relational concept – it is not enough, in other words, simply to ensure that all have more resources, whatever the distribution, since empowerment (and hence autonomy) is dependent on interpersonal relations. Nevertheless, it seems clear that in general

49 Cf. Giddens, *Third Way*, especially pp. 65–66.
50 Ibid., p. 109
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid., p. 110.
53 For another example, cf. G. A. Cohen, 'Back to Socialist Basics', *New Left Review* 207 (1994), 3–16.
54 Plant, 'Citizenship and Rights', p. 21.

even where thinkers were still prepared to concede a theoretical role to equality, they tended very much to grant it a subsidiary status. Thus Giddens, to take but one example, despite arguing that simple equality of opportunity was not enough to help ensure autonomy, nevertheless maintained that equality ought to be defined primarily in terms of social inclusion, and not of distributive justice.[55] In general, in other words, Thatcherite discourse simply remained too dominant for more ambitious egalitarian programmes to be countenanced.

In the later 1990s and early this century there has been something of a reaction on the Left to such conceptions of citizenship and autonomy in favour of more social democratic arguments. Such a reaction has taken several forms, and the arguments put forward have not always been mutually compatible, though there is certainly enough consistency to establish a coherent core. Firstly, these theorists have sought to clarify precisely what "social democracy" as an ideology entails, to attempt to save it from the Thatcherite charge that its egalitarianism necessarily implies an unacceptable loss of liberty, but also, increasingly, to counter the claim by New Labour that a new synthesis of social democratic and liberal traditions was necessary. According to such theorists this synthesis had already been satisfactorily accomplished by earlier social democratic thinkers. Secondly, they have sought to show that, whilst social exclusion is not reducible to the question of poverty, the two phenomena are more interlinked than theorists on citizenship in the earlier 1990s had allowed. Finally, whilst they have accepted the argument of "Third Way" theorists such as Giddens that welfare rights come with corresponding responsibilities, they have sought to argue that such obligations can only be held to be valid in a society with substantive (and not simply formal) equality. It should be stressed that these arguments are far from being the most orthodox in current British political life, but they are nevertheless still a significant development. We will briefly examine each argument in turn.

Firstly, as indicated, political theorists, including Michael Freeden and Stuart White[56], have striven to contest the charge that pursuance of equality must necessarily conflict with the quest for liberty. Rather, building on arguments similar to Plant's, they argue that individuals can only achieve true liberty when accorded full rights of citizenship (as opposed to being mere consumers), but that this inevitably implies a substantive equalizing of their starting conditions. It is not enough to define equality as "social inclusion", in other words, if this equates in practice to granting merely minimal standards of welfare and entitlement, and they argue that Third Way theorists such as Giddens are at best highly ambiguous on this point.[57] Furthermore, a critical part of their case is that although the welfare state as it has been administered in practice since the 1960s may have inadequately stressed the reciprocal obligations of recipients of its beneficence, this is not a problem intrinsic to social democratic ideology. The social democratic tradition itself, in other words, according to these writers,

55 Cf. Giddens, *Third Way*, pp. 101–111.
56 Michael Freeden, 'True Blood or False Genealogy: New Labour and British Social Democratic Thought' and Stuart White, '"Rights and Responsibilities": A Social Democratic Perspective', both in Andrew Gamble and Anthony Wright (eds), *The New Social Democracy* (Oxford, 1999).
57 Cf., for example, White, '"Rights"', pp. 167–168.

contains the resources to deal with this problem, since earlier social democratic thinkers such as R. H. Tawney, Anthony Crosland and Richard Titmuss had taken considerable care to reconcile the claims of liberty and equality. As Freeden has put it, for example, disputing the claim that New Labour was faced with the challenge of emphasizing the importance of liberty against the statist instincts of social democracy: "the work of assimilating some of the most advanced ideas of liberalism had already been accomplished by … social democrats within the Labour movement".[58] Such thinkers are, of course, still left with the problem of devising welfare institutions that are less bureaucratic in practice, but this is, after all, a difficulty that Thatcherism failed to solve in practice, and which many theorists of citizenship have failed to address. Furthermore, it could be added, there is every reason to dispute the historical accuracy of those who seek to prove that either the pre-war system of welfare functioned well (such as Green) or that there was a clearly viable alternative in mutualism (such as Hirst). In fact there is good evidence to suggest more collectivist solutions were pursued after 1945 at least partially because voluntary contributions in the interwar period failed to keep pace with demand for welfare[59], and although this obviously does not automatically discredit those seeking to find alternatives to the current welfare state, it does raise serious questions about some of their claims.

Secondly, some theorists, notably Brian Barry[60], have emphasized that providing even basic equal rights to all citizens is actually a far more costly business than has often been suggested. For example, gaining a fair trial in practice actually implies a high amount of spending on legal aid, and to allow the poor to participate fully in political life necessarily implies an extensive range of welfare services in order to enable them to do this.[61] And any desire to go further and meaningfully to prevent social exclusion implies a whole range of other costs to fund public services, especially upon education and public transport.[62] This is necessary, argues Barry, not only to provide true equality of opportunity to the poor, but also to encourage the rich not to opt out of public services, since this inevitably leads to their deterioration. In the view of theorists like Barry, therefore, Giddens's claim that the welfare state should be "a pooling of risk and not resources"[63] becomes vacuous, since it does not delineate a real dichotomy. And furthermore, in practice, the high personal taxation needed to fund these services will mean that it is "unlikely … to leave many people with enough disposable income … to do better privately"[64], hence leading to an egalitarian outcome *de facto*. Even if one simply argues for the elimination of social exclusion, therefore, rather than for the more direct

58 Freeden, 'True Blood', p. 151.

59 For example, cf. Geoffrey Finlayson, *Citizen, State and Social Welfare in Britain 1830–1990* (Oxford, 1994).

60 Cf. Brian Barry, *Social Exclusion, Social Isolation and the Distribution of Income* (London, 1998). For similar arguments, cf. David Miller, 'What Kind of Equality Should the Left Pursue?', in Jane Franklin (ed.), *Equality* (London, 1997).

61 Barry, *Social Exclusion,* p. 14.

62 Ibid., p. 20.

63 Giddens, *Third Way*, p. 116.

64 Barry, *Social Exclusion*, p. 22.

equalization of starting conditions through the redistribution of income, the result in practice will be more similar than Giddens and other Third Way theorists maintain.

Finally, although new social democrats accept that it is perfectly reasonable (as Giddens and others do) to maintain that the granting of rights to citizens necessarily implies corresponding obligations, they stress that the enforcement of such obligations can only be valid under such equal conditions: as White puts it – "universal enforcement is unjust … unless certain background conditions first obtain".[65] Such background conditions would vary, but would probably include a right to work (including the necessary education and training) for all those expected to fulfil responsibilities, in order to meet these obligations in a meaningful way. Furthermore, they would also involve citizens being decently rewarded for the work they perform, and the establishment of conditions such that universal obligations are truly universal in practice. This argument reinforces Barry's on social exclusion, since it implies action to prevent "free-riding" by the rich, but its accent is more on the "principled" argument that all should be equally liable, and less on the "pragmatic" one that public services can only be maintained if all have a stake in them.

Conclusion

Whilst it is clearly too soon to assess fully the importance of the reappearance of social democratic arguments at the end of the 1990s, there seems little doubt that their re-emergence marks an important departure. Partly, of course, the change is to be explained simply by the election of New Labour in 1997, so that the target of social democrats is no longer Thatcherism, but rather a government which, in seeking to enact "Third Way" policies, shares at least some of their aims. But, as we have seen, such a development has deeper roots – namely in the intellectual exhaustion of Thatcherism, and in the ambiguous nature of the Third Way. Although discreetly, mainstream political debate on the question of citizenship in the 1990s has shifted from the question of what best guarantees consumer freedom to the questions of what guarantees the very existence of civil society, and what conditions have to be met for citizens to participate fully. This is not to suggest that, in practice, policymakers do not retain a number of assumptions that they have inherited from Thatcherism. Nor is it to suggest that new social democrats have a complete set of answers to the problem of citizenship, since, as thinkers such as Hirst have emphasized, greater accountability and participation cannot be achieved without a new set of democratic structures to change the power dynamic in favour of the individual citizen. But it nevertheless seems clear that their greater stress on equality marks an important shift – how important, though, only time will tell.

65 White, ' "Rights" ', p. 167.