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Neoliberalism and Conservatism in Britain

James Freeman

What was the relationship between neoliberalism and Conservatism in twentieth-century Britain? Political and intellectual historians have often told the story of one by reference to the other. Until recently, for example, the main impetus for tracing 'neoliberalism' back to an international network of thinkers in the 1930s and 1940s was to explain the ideas and networks that supposedly held sway over Conservative elites in later decades.¹ In Britain, the high-water mark of neoliberal influence was normally located in the Conservative administrations governing between 1979 and 1997.² Accordingly, when critics or advocates of neoliberalism looked for agents of neoliberal change in Britain these were often found working in the party's orbit.

Writing about twentieth-century Conservatism has likewise been shaped by neoliberalism. The label has been used to describe shifts in party philosophy or factional power struggles.³ It also plays a role in the literature's preoccupation with explaining 'Thatcherism'.⁴ Neoliberal ideas both help distinguish Thatcherism from other Conservatisms and help tie together the aims, policies and arguments of Thatcher's governments as a local implementation of a transnational ideology. Thus, as one of many spillover effects of searching for Thatcherism's origins, neoliberalism has indirectly shaped our understanding of the party's history well before the 1970s.

But as much as these are two histories told in tandem, adequately describing the interaction between neoliberalism and Conservative politics has proven challenging. Contemporaries noted tensions between neoliberal solutions and the party's political needs, as well as an uncomfortable intellectual fit between the two on certain issues,

particularly on questions of personal morality.⁵ Representatives of each tradition have offered public support for the other and yet made it clear that they did not regard themselves as members.⁶ Other representatives have been openly hostile, arguing that links between the two are unwelcome or tantamount to an invasion.⁷ Political scientists and historians have further contributed to the catalogue of contradictions, mostly by exposing the inconsistent practice of Conservatives said to be governing as neoliberals.⁸

To make sense of the 1970s and 1980s in particular, commentators and academics institutionalised these tensions in terms such as 'the New Right' and 'Thatcherism', or in formulations such as 'the free economy and the strong state'.⁹ As Ben Jackson and Robert Saunders point out, these terms are themselves historical artefacts; they were responses to the observation that the political energy of the right in this period seemingly stemmed from contacts between Conservatism and neoliberalism, aided at least in part by think tanks.¹⁰ Rather than tie much down, these terms produced more debate. At its best, this provoked insightful, cross-disciplinary exchanges about what their alliance represented.¹¹ At its worst, it became self-limiting, trapping explanations of what happened within a web of contemporary terms that came to signify both the ideas said to be motivating political action and the resulting policies themselves.

As we learn more about the inner workings of Thatcher's governments, it has also become evident that these formulations imply too much coherency and too little contingency and evolution.¹² While think tanks did play a role in policy change, it is easily overstated and a much wider array of motivations, influences, interests and actors were involved.¹³ New ideas were in play, but they stood in relation to longer historical processes.¹⁴ And while the tension between Conservative and 'neoliberal' instincts did directly inform policy debates, these tensions are best thought of as ongoing, malleable, sometimes explosive, sometimes inert, and generally more unstable than the terms above implied.¹⁵ 'Thatcherism', then, is not so much a term that denotes a stable configuration of Conservative and neoliberal ideas then implemented, as one set of possible paths Conservatives took through complex electoral and policy problems, only partly guided by an ongoing renegotiation of Conservative and neoliberal principles and arguments.

Taken together, this recent work suggests we need to think afresh about the interface between Conservatism and neoliberalism, freeing our description from the questions, timelines and models suited to explaining the Thatcher 'revolution'. Paradoxically, this does not mean ceasing to focus on the 1970s and 1980s as the period in which the two became most

obviously entwined (although understanding other points of contact is important).¹⁶ Rather, it means reading their relationship in these decades in ways that look beyond the question of 'influence'. The factors driving their relationship might be different from those that led Thatcher to power. The mechanisms shaping their interaction might lie outside the policy process. And the events and developments that put this relationship in historical perspective might involve people who do not feature in the usual backstory of Thatcherism.

This chapter begins to re-describe the relationship between Conservatism and neoliberalism in two ways. Firstly, it resets our historical perspective on their relationship prior to Thatcherism by drawing out the cumulative historiographical impact of applying models used to understand their interaction in the 1980s to earlier periods. Secondly, the chapter offers a deeper account of the interface between Conservatism and neoliberalism in the late 1970s and early 1980s. 'Interface' is a deliberate choice of term. My interest here is not the organisational structures of think tanks or academic/journalistic networks. Nor is it in establishing a chain of neoliberal influence from thinker through to policy implementation. And nor is it the wider socio-economic contexts that promoted a *general* affinity between the two. Instead, I want to isolate specific moments of contact and assess what their particular features – both medium and message – tell us about the wider interaction between Conservatives and neoliberal arguments. One way to take forward Ben Jackson's suggestion that we pay closer attention to how politicians translated abstract ideas into more 'demotic' terms, then, is to better characterise the kinds of interaction that took place between these groups as part of a speechwriting process.¹⁷

Neoliberalism and Conservatism before 1975

'Influence' has been the chief way of relating neoliberalism to Conservatism. While this is most obvious in accounts of think tanks' influence on Margaret Thatcher's party, three types of 'influence claim' have been made about earlier periods. Firstly, historians have detected influence in specific moments in the party's post-war history, especially in Churchill's 'Gestapo' broadcast of 1945.¹⁸ Secondly, earlier Conservatives have been identified as converts to neoliberal thought.¹⁹ Thirdly, there are broader claims to influence, such as those which read the 1945–51 Opposition's emancipatory rhetoric as evidence of Conservatives adding 'a dash of Hayek to their previously Keynesian tonic'.²⁰ The weight placed

on intellectual influences varies, but this reading of rhetoric opens up a connection between Thatcherism and 1940s Conservatism.

Yet the influence model can distort neoliberals' relationship to Conservatism in earlier periods. As I have discussed elsewhere, the claim that F. A. Hayek's *Road to Serfdom* (1944) influenced Churchill's 1945 election broadcasts is unsound.²¹ The speech's general line of argument was set prior to the publication of Hayek's book and it built on a tradition of argument that could produce similar conclusions to Hayek but from distinctly Conservative premises. Accordingly, reading 1945 as an inaugural moment for the party's relationship with neoliberalism omits the roles of Stanley Baldwin and other figures such as Viscount Cranbourne; they were not influenced by neoliberals, but they did develop their party's tradition of argument in directions that shaped the relationship between Conservatism and neoliberalism as the latter emerged.²²

'Influence' also detracts from other developments in anti-statist arguments. Debate about the nationalisation of banks in the mid-1930s, for example, saw Conservatives argue that competition enshrined public control over the economy: industries worked to meet public demand and banks financed those successfully doing so. Without banks' freedom to make investment decisions, the public would lose its 'freedom of choice', and socialists looking to impose totalitarianism 'in the public interest' might simply cut off breweries' credit.²³ 'Influence' does not take us very far here. A specific rhetorical need (refuting the accusation that banking elites controlled the economy) encouraged the mixing of newer arguments with older attacks on progressives. Instead, it suggests one factor promoting longer-term compatibilities – but not equivalence – between Conservative and neoliberal arguments was that interwar debate about the 'public interest' shaped both.

A second means of relating Conservatism and neoliberalism has been to use 'neoliberal' as a label to denote free-market positions.²⁴ This is an understandable – if problematic – shorthand in the 1970s. But without caveats, it risks anachronism or confusion with simple 'libertarian' positions when applied to earlier periods, because it homogenises neoliberal viewpoints and underplays the evolution of their positions between the 1930s and 1980s.²⁵ Even with caveats, the label can misrepresent episodes in the party's history. For example, the party's 1949 policy statement 'The right road for Britain' can accurately be read as a departure from the *Industrial Charter* (1947). It is not, however, evidence of a party turning towards 'neo-liberalism'.²⁶ In fact, the party's right criticised the document for 'rather too much adherence to the notion

of a planned economy'.²⁷ The impression of a shift arises in part because its launch was designed to deflect that criticism.²⁸ Control-cutting individualism came through in the press coverage and Churchill's associated speech. His speechwriters were clear, though, that they wanted to free the economy to protect full employment and social services, not reject them.²⁹ The risk with using the term, then, is that it shrinks the distance between the mid-century party and neoliberals of both periods.

This labelling has been attractive because it integrates the relationship between neoliberalism and Conservatism within a wider model that understands Conservative history as a tussle between 'paternalist' and 'libertarian' instincts, arranging policies, factions and periods along that axis.³⁰ Little of the original chronology remains unchallenged. However, its basic plot – the libertarian strand's rise, fall and revival – set the template for claims that the influence of neoliberals under Thatcher represented either a Conservative restoration or a liberal invasion.³¹ Moreover, neoliberalism has been drawn into explanations which retain the duality's concepts but complicate its narrative. For some historians, Conservatives pragmatically drew on both instincts. Jim Tomlinson described 1950s economic policy as neither 'neo-liberal' nor interventionist but 'lurch[ing] from expedient to expedient' in pursuit of 'liberty with order'.³² Alternatively, Harriet Jones identified a 'reinvigorated neo-liberal Conservatism' in 1950–1, but one restrained by the electorate's support for social services.³³ To others, the 'two souls' of Conservatism were reconciled by a higher principle, such as the preservation of social order, or by seeing conflicting rhetoric as a proxy for a deeper debate about the effectiveness of civil society's institutions.³⁴

In later periods, related theories have helped explain why Conservatives were attracted to neoliberalism. Neoliberal theory, it can be argued, was one part of a political project to construct a cross-class electoral alliance, and the link between new ideas and economic circumstances is captured in the idea that Conservatives were attracted to neoliberalism as a way to navigate the crisis of Keynesian social democracy or legitimise a counter-inflationary strategy.³⁵ Likewise, contradictions between Conservatism and neoliberalism can be lessened by seeing the latter as a tool for pursuing a higher statecraft.³⁶

But in earlier periods, the duality model and the theories attached to it have obscured the relationship between Conservatism and neoliberalism. The duality oversimplifies the ideological breadth of mid-century Conservatism.³⁷ In particular, the temptation to focus on 'libertarian' periods or factions misses important developments that rendered *mainstream* Conservatism much more compatible with

neoliberalism. For instance, it was R. A. Butler who began to make important connections between welfare, choice and moral virtue. As Home Secretary, he argued that, although he did *not* think crime was 'entirely due to the . . . Welfare State', it was important to recognise that crime had risen despite prosperity and that material satisfaction had not ensured 'moral progress'.³⁸ Several years later, through debates that (re)established the family as key to preventing delinquency, he made the case for the 'proper balance between State-help and self-help' on the grounds that the family's role was to transmit 'manners and morals', and that the family could not be expected to 'remain vigorous and vital if it comes to rely on the State'.³⁹

The language of pragmatism also fosters unhelpful arguments about sincerity. In the early post-war period, Churchill's party is said to have not been committed to its libertarian rhetoric.⁴⁰ Later, in a highly politicised version, Edward Heath is either guilty of having betrayed the neoliberal policies his rhetoric in opposition suggested, or of having 'allow[ed] himself to be pushed into a more doctrinaire right-wing rhetoric'.⁴¹ In both instances, the reading of Conservative rhetoric as 'neoliberal' sets up a false standard in which it is only sincere if it reflects 'neoliberal' policies. These arguments have several weaknesses. Firstly, they misconstrue the motivations of the rhetoric said to reflect neoliberalism. Because the emancipatory rhetoric of 1940s Conservatism reflected a diagnosis of Britain's economic situation, not abstract views of the state, leading Conservatives could call for both deep cuts to public spending and a corporatist Industrial Parliament.⁴² Secondly, by underestimating Conservative commitment to principles, they ignore important developments. During the economic crisis of 1961, for example, the principle of a 'free society' acted as an important brake on intervention. Conservatives stressed that their pay pause needed to be voluntary to preserve the free society, in contrast to their opponents who allegedly desired a 'Fascist society where we would impose our will'.⁴³ Well into 1962, the Cabinet's private and public framing of the crisis centred on the challenge of how to control inflation without sacrificing freedom, and Harold Macmillan put his New Approach (an Incomes Commission) to the Cabinet as an answer to whether it was possible to meet their economic objectives 'in a free society'.⁴⁴ Even though the policy itself was the antithesis of neoliberalism, the arguments made at the time about the balance of freedom and responsibility became a major site of connection between later Conservatives and neoliberals. Thirdly, because they ignore this heritage, accusations of insincerity forget that freedom rhetoric was *not* the exclusive property of the New Right in 1960s Britain;

Conservatives with different beliefs were making different arguments about freedom and its conditions. Heath's speeches on the Great Divide owed as much to Macmillan's earlier rhetoric as they did to Enoch Powell's. A key step in breaking the hold of Thatcherism over the relationship between Conservatism and neoliberals, then, is reading the rhetoric of earlier periods on its own terms.

The image of a party with competing instincts has informed a final model for relating neoliberalism and Conservatism, one less concerned with direct 'influences' than with identifying 'resonances' between the two to help explain Thatcherism. Individual policies associated with Thatcher's governments have been shown to have a much longer lineage, suggesting the novelty of Thatcher's governments lay in their ability to implement neoliberal-inflected versions of long-standing aims given more fortuitous circumstances.⁴⁵ More broadly, E. H. H. Green saw Thatcherism as a product of 'trends in the Conservative Party's subculture since 1945', and others have built on his insight to claim that Thatcher used her party's traditions – especially that of the One Nation Group – to 'domesticate' the American New Right.⁴⁶ In Jackson's more nuanced model, neoliberalism's success is partly down to how effectively it was 'translated into diverse neo-liberalisms' suited to party traditions.⁴⁷

This 'resonance' model is the best platform on which to build an understanding of neoliberalism's relationship with Conservatism that connects developments from different periods without falling into teleology. It does need modification, though. There is a natural bias towards exploring more obvious precursors or claimed connections. As such, the danger is that the approach mirrors other approaches to Thatcherism, emphasising headline policies, economics and the state over other connections. Too little attention has been paid, for example, to the increasing advocacy of an emotional politics of conflict in 1960s Conservatism, or the tendency to ground virtue in the characteristics of an agricultural community, not just the imagined virtues of the urban middle class. Furthermore, to escape the one-directional 'influence' model, we need to assess how far changes in neoliberal thought itself created new connections with Conservatism. Melinda Cooper's work on 'family values' and Jackson's analysis of neoliberals' reliance on the breadwinner model indicate ways forward,⁴⁸ but the literature on neoliberals' views of tradition and religion remains disconnected from political histories. Finally, the way to construct a history of the relationship between neoliberalism and Conservatism outside Thatcherism's origin story is to see these developments as a process in which two traditions of argument gradually developed more *potential* commonalities. These were

not inevitable connections: understanding the historically specific pressures that shaped how arguments developed at each stage is a pressing task. Nor did these commonalities need to end in Thatcherism. That outcome relied very much upon the agency of later actors responding to these potential links, and it is to that process which we now turn.

The interface

Interrogating policymaking has changed how historians think about the role of neoliberal and Conservative ideas in shaping initiatives under Thatcher. But the case for reading the 1970s and 1980s as a fusion of Conservatism and neoliberalism has never rested on policies alone; for Stuart Hall and others, ‘Thatcherism’ was expressed in the narratives, values and logics Thatcher and her allies used to win support for their programme.⁴⁹ To fully understand the interface between neoliberalism and Conservatism in the late 1970s and 1980s, then, we need to complement analysis of policy with a finer-grained understanding of the processes that generated these wider arguments. In the remainder of this chapter, I demonstrate this approach by asking what the contributions of speechwriters, advisers and Thatcher’s own reading can tell us about the interface between neoliberalism and Conservatism.

Speechwriting played an important role in Thatcher’s leadership. Reconfiguring the electorate’s understanding of the world was seen as a precondition of victory, and considerable effort was expended on crafting the leader’s message. Practically, Thatcher also used the process of speechwriting to collect and integrate viewpoints.⁵⁰ For her advisers and speechwriters, access to this process was an important way to exert influence, especially when they had less access to the party or Whitehall. To accurately describe the interface between Conservatism and neoliberalism in shaping the party’s discourse, then, we need to describe these writers’ roles in relating the two.

Alfred Sherman is perhaps the best-known example of a speechwriter and adviser who served as a ‘conduit’ for neoliberal ideas.⁵¹ He was well connected with the network of free-market think tanks, was fluent in the ideas of neoliberal economists and had direct access to the Conservative leadership. Along with Thatcher and Keith Joseph, he founded the Centre for Policy Studies (CPS), which coordinated neoliberal-informed perspectives on policy problems and which is thought of as a ‘focal point of their efforts to convert the Conservative party to the ideology of neo-liberalism’.⁵²

But although Sherman is sometimes presented as 'attracted to ideological absolutism', he and other speechwriters thought of themselves as Conservatives, not neoliberal 'ideologues'.⁵³ Sherman described himself, and the CPS, as 'Tories first, (economic) liberals only second'. In his view, economic liberalism was not a universal 'verity'; it was dependent on circumstance and assumed certain values, ethics and social obligations.⁵⁴ Indeed, Sherman sometimes made the case for market solutions in the traditional Conservative tones of pragmatism. In 1981, for example, he privately urged the Prime Minister to refute the idea that Benjamin Disraeli would have been a 'wet' and explain that her government was neither 'monetarist' nor 'laissez-faire'.⁵⁵ Conservatives *did* believe that humankind could 'gain increasing control over its social environment'. They were just wary of the 'unexpected side-effects'. That 'indiscriminate welfare can demoralise . . . [did] not mean that we should cease to seek constructive ways of helping the unfortunate, and indeed the unworthy, because we are a Christian society'. Rather, it meant that governments must assess the impacts of such policies on recipients, taxpayers and those 'struggling to shift for themselves'. Similarly, Conservatives 'had never argued that the Government must necessarily always stand aloof from industrial and commercial matters'. They merely felt that most intervention had 'done more harm than good'.

Some might doubt Sherman's sincerity – ideologues can, after all, adapt their arguments for an audience. Yet this standpoint explains how advisers such as Sherman promoted both moral conservatism and economic liberalism to their political masters. In 1976, for example, Sherman proposed that Thatcher take a stand against pornography. Responding to the publication of *Inside Linda Lovelace* (1976), Sherman feared that the 'whole system of dykes provided by the law against the flow of pornography, anti-social fantasies, and sexual corruption [was] on the point of collapse'.⁵⁶ Much of Sherman's case echoed arguments made by Conservatives throughout the 1960s. Pornography was an evil because it normalised the treatment of people (especially women) as means rather than ends; it threatened the family – 'the basis of civilisation'; and it created a 'moral climate' in which weakened restraints on 'gratification of anti-social instincts' could spiral into other areas. Importantly, Sherman emphasised a 'populist' element to these arguments by claiming that the climate of opinion had been shifted by a small number of opinion formers, some of whom saw 'the breaking down of sexual restraints as a weapon for weakening capitalist society'. In fact, 'the majority of people fear[ed] pornography . . . But they lack[ed] the means of expressing their fear.' In place of 'so-called experts', 'ordinary people's

experience and wit must be taken into account' and if the 'resentment' of mothers, housewives, parents and churches were 'organised' then pressure for action would arise. This suggests that a complex mix of advisers' beliefs and the active pitching of rhetorical opportunities may connect Thatcher's rhetoric to a wider anti-permissive reaction.⁵⁷

As noted below, the wider use of 'populist' framings may have played a role in smoothing tensions between Conservative and neoliberal arguments. Nevertheless, there was a contradiction between Sherman's call for moralism and the freedom he advocated elsewhere. Critically, he addressed this:

Now it may be asked: how does this square with our abjuration of paternalism, our espousal of liberty, our contention that men must work out their own salvation, must grapple with temptation? Yes we must allow people to make their own choices and live with them, but we must also protect the weak, the victim, the exploitee. Where these two duties conflict, it is the weak, the women and children, the potential victims who have the first claim on us.⁵⁸

This should give us pause for thought about one of the main vectors through which 'neoliberal' ideas reached the Conservative leadership. The story is not necessarily one in which outsiders provided ideas which were *then* brought into tension with other currents by the leaders themselves. Instead, the individuals who connected the party with neoliberal networks did so a) from the perspective of Conservatism and b) with the potential tensions between elements of the two consciously in mind. In short, it suggests that the activity of combining these forces must be sought downstream from leaders and that an alliance model in which *different* individuals contributed to the creation of a mixed message is inadequate.

This understanding of Sherman sheds light on two more specific contributions that help characterise the interface between neoliberalism and Conservatism. Firstly, Sherman's ability to straddle both the Conservative and neoliberal worlds was precisely why Thatcher found him useful as a speechwriter. One of his typical tasks was to synthesise contributions from others, combining the words of traditional Conservative speeches with his own Conservative reading of liberal economics.⁵⁹ He was, for example, responsible for editing Lord Elton's draft of Thatcher's Iain Macleod Lecture and inserted a section that defended self-interest as moral.⁶⁰ Secondly, Sherman's social conservatism meant that he served as a conduit for a wider range of international thought. In 1979, for

example, he wrote to Joseph and Thatcher about the threat posed by the 'disintegration' of the arts.⁶¹ Those art forms directly 'contributing to violence or irresponsible behaviour [were] only a small part of the evil' – rock, punk and pop art, and the celebration of anti-heroes, were unlikely to produce a society 'at peace with itself'. He attached an issue of a broadsheet produced by the Rockford College Institute, the American conservative think tank, which précised parts of Michael Novak's *The American Vision* (1978) to claim that a 'new class' of activists, officials and entertainment elites were intent on bringing about a cultural shift. As well as promoting violence, their efforts to convince audiences that liberal morality was what 'most people think' threatened capitalism. Television's support for the 'do-it-your-way liberation ethos' was subverting 'hierarchical working relationships', and its relentless advocacy of 'having a good time and gratifying the senses' undermined the work ethic. Banning pornography was not enough; corporations had to use their influence to ensure cultural outputs reaffirmed the principles of 'thrift, honour, and virtue' that supported capitalism. What Sherman's role reveals, then, is that the individuals normally seen as carrying neoliberal ideas into British Conservatism were also carrying a neoconservative tradition, one increasingly framing its arguments in populist terms and using the language of virtues to connect public morality and the survival of capitalism.

The Letwins

More occasional advisers also played a role in bridging Conservatism and neoliberalism. In 1976, for example, Thatcher and Joseph regularly dined with the academics William and Shirley Letwin. Although the label 'neoliberal' would not apply to either in a straightforward way, the Letwins' careers had connected them with the first Chicago strand of neoliberalism,⁶² and they provided Thatcher with notes that became sources for several speeches they helped write. One such paper, on the role of the state, illuminates several features of the interface between neoliberal ideas and Conservative politics that are worth unpacking.

Firstly, arguments and policies clearly influenced by the neoliberal thought collective were pitched into Conservative politics in a re-systematised form. In the Letwins' system, the organising concept became a state which 'ruled' rather than 'managed' and sought only to secure 'freedom for self-determination'.⁶³ Instead of maximising wealth, health or education, the state limited itself to actions which enabled people to

‘preserve and develop their individual identity’. Support for that concept could be found in the writings of most neoliberal authors. But in the Letwins’ version this premise acted as *the* justification for other positions that had multiple rationales in the wider neoliberal corpus. Governing through stable laws rather than arbitrary decrees was important, for example, because it was a condition of people being able to exercise self-determination in a predictable context. What Conservative leaders were presented with were somewhat truncated pathways through neoliberal arguments.

Secondly, these pathways were selected in response to rhetorical problems. Much of the Letwins’ paper was designed to combat the accusation that Conservatives envisioned a weak state. This in part explains the focus on ‘self-determination’; it was explicitly intended to reconceptualise the differences between political parties as not about the *extent* of the state but about its aims. Consequently, the paper foregrounded the need for a strong state: ‘government concerned to rule must be strong government’ to secure both individual self-determination and competition against monopoly power. This was a central spine of neoliberal argument, particularly associated with the German ordoliberals. But the conscious emphasis the Letwins gave to it as a proleptic defence against their critics suggests that we may have underplayed the role of perceived rhetorical needs in selecting which arguments – indeed which strands of neoliberalism – were emphasised.

Similarly, the Letwins set out to combat accusations that Conservatives desired a ‘free-for-all’. Accordingly, they repainted the corporatist state as a licentious anarchy in which the monopoly interests battled for control at the expense of the individual. The strong state was necessary to protect self-determination against these bullies. Likewise, to anticipate the charge that such a state would be uncaring, the Letwins agreed it should provide a minimum standard in welfare and education. This standard could even be high, provided it was a political decision. This allowed them to recast the issue as whether or not the state sought out ways in which it could avoid becoming a monopolising power or increasing dependency (the inverse of self-determination). Neoliberal policies such as a negative income tax, school and university vouchers, and health and mortgage insurance schemes were recommended as complementary ways to achieve these ends, ones which the state could support alongside its own provision to preserve opportunities for self-determination.

This was a conscious principle of rhetorical selection: the paper ends by listing the ways its earlier suggestions meet these tasks. It also accounts for a third feature: the presentation of neoliberal policies in a populist

framework that layered an English nationalism onto minority–majority structures. In the Letwins’ view, for example, the existence of a minority which ‘could not live as adults’ and take on the responsibilities of self-determination was not a sufficient reason to ‘reduce the people of England to the status of children’. Self-determination also meant the championing of the ‘hard common sense for which [England] was always distinguished’ over the arrogance of government and experts. Accordingly, one section of the paper transitioned quickly from arguments about economic intervention to make the case against compulsory vaccination schemes. Self-determination in this context was not so much an efficiency principle or route to moral behaviour as an emotive appeal ‘to restore to the people of England mastery over their own lives’. Of course, opposition to overbearing elites had long been part of the party’s discourse. This was not a rhetorical layer added later, though; it was part of how more complex points derived from neoliberal points of view arrived into Conservative argument. Indeed, read alongside Roberto Romani’s recent case that neoliberal thought took on a populist turn from the 1970s, the Letwins’ paper suggests that one reason why neoliberalism might have been useful was the ease with which it could be assimilated into national populist frameworks.⁶⁴

Finally, the Letwins explicitly positioned interest in neoliberal policy alternatives with reference to a *Conservative* ethos. The paper contained an entire section on ‘implications for Conservatives’ which re-emphasised that the latter were ‘practical politicians’, not ‘ideologues’ replacing one ideology with another. This pragmatism was said to lead Conservatives to look to alternative policies dismissed by their opponents outright, such as voucher and insurance-based schemes. Indeed, Conservatives were said to be uniquely able to examine these alternatives because they represented the nation, not interest groups. Centring the principle of self-determination played an important supporting role here because it offered proof that the party had no ‘fanciful, ideological preoccupations’ – seemingly its only interest was to allow the people to make decisions. This suggests that neoliberal positions and Conservative themes were not simply placed together. Their relationship is better characterised as one in which some long-standing themes of Conservative rhetoric could provide a justification for the inclusion of neoliberal alternatives.

Thatcher’s reading

To explain Thatcher’s mix of moral conservatism and neoliberal economics, it is tempting to emphasise her personal faith.⁶⁵ In fact, her

oft-cited speeches on the links between religion, morality and free enterprise were largely written by others and rehearsed well-worn Conservative arguments. This is not to say she lacked agency; Thatcher engaged with a wide range of materials to set her speechwriters' briefs. But apocryphal stories about her dramatically directing colleagues to Hayek's *Constitution of Liberty* have detracted from a more complex picture of what she read and what this tells us about the relationship between Conservative and neoliberal thought.⁶⁶ To understand the interface between the two we need to consider the arguments made in some lesser-known texts that Thatcher read and pay closer attention to how these were interpreted.

The materials that Thatcher 'saved' in her speechwriting files suggest that books written by neoliberals informed speechwriting. It is not coincidental, though, that the clearest examples involve authors who emphasised the commonalities between Conservative and neoliberal ideas. Henry Hazlitt is a good example. An American journalist and member of the Mont Pèlerin Society (MPS) who popularised the work of the early neoliberal economist Ludwig von Mises and Hayek, parts of Hazlitt's *Foundations of Morality* (1964) can be found in Thatcher's 'ideas' folder for speeches on Conservative philosophy.⁶⁷ The specific chapter retained is important because it synthesised different neoliberal writers to reconcile liberal economics with morality. Hazlitt's argument began by asserting that free enterprise 'presupposed morality' – both because its underlying principles, such as private property, rested on morality and because enterprise needed to be conducted in a climate of morality to serve the general interest. Yet Hazlitt's central claim was that free markets strengthened morality. To this end, he framed two elements of the market economy as 'social cooperation'. Using Burke's analogy of wrestlers improving each other's skill, Hazlitt saw competition as triangular cooperation – companies spurred each other to innovate and in doing so cooperated with the consumer to lower prices.⁶⁸ He then quoted Ludwig von Mises to show that the division of labour was not an endorsement of self-interest but an acceptance that individuals could best meet the needs of others by acting in their own self-interest.⁶⁹ Crucially, this system of 'mutualism' rendered debates about altruism and egotism redundant – individuals could never know how their actions impacted others, but the system itself ensured they cooperated.

Hazlitt then marshalled together several more 'neoliberal' writers to draw out the moral benefits of this cooperation. Von Mises's student and fellow MPS member Murray Rothbard was quoted to claim friendship resulted from the free economy's social cooperation – the cooperation

intrinsic to the division of labour gave scope for friendliness and other forms of cooperation to arise, whereas an economic system lacking it would reduce individuals to a violent, zero-sum scramble for resources. It also provided a strong incentive to restrain immoral behaviours, as breaches would result in less willingness to cooperate.⁷⁰ Importantly, though, it was the free economy's version of social cooperation that led to moral improvement. As a system of freedom, this cooperation was *actively chosen* by participants. Quoting Hayek, Hazlitt claimed this free choice was the precondition of moral virtue and left individuals free to voluntarily use the surplus generated by the efficient system in selfless ways.⁷¹ The combination of these points allowed Hazlitt to argue that the free economy was a system that made people more interdependent and led to a general raising of morality through its incentives.

To be clear, 'influence' is not what is at stake here. Hazlitt's arguments had much in common with traditional Conservative explanations of how socialism demoralised individuals and how free choice improved people. However, the fact that some of the specific neoliberal texts we can be more confident Thatcher actually read were those which emphasised the compatibility of the liberal market with morality tells us two things about the interface between neoliberalism and Conservatism. Firstly, the interface involved more than raw theory – the particular glosses and arrangements given to neoliberal thought in summary texts such as Hazlitt's can help explain how and why these traditions were seen as compatible. Secondly, the tensions identified between questions of morality and liberal economics were not necessarily products of neoliberal texts colliding with Conservatism; instead, the Conservative leadership could be exposed to these ideas through explorations of that tension (and attempts to resolve it).

We must also remember that politicians did not experience the interface between Conservative and neoliberal ideas in isolation; texts belonging to neither tradition could reinforce arguments from either and bridge their arguments. One such example can be seen in criticism of social science. Attacks on the left as led by an arrogant intelligentsia planning to remake society had a long pedigree in Conservative circles, along with the idea that government schemes dehumanised people in favour of statistics. By the late 1960s, some Conservatives targeted this critique at social scientists, claiming their work on the causes of crime and other social ills undermined the intellectual foundations of responsibility.⁷² For their part, neoliberals made a similar case that the application of determinist approaches from the physical sciences to human society had played a part in diminishing individual responsibility.⁷³

But at least one of the ways in which Thatcher was aware of these arguments was via a piece by Paul Wilding in *New Society*.⁷⁴ Wilding, a lecturer in Social Administration, was no Thatcherite and would go on to write a defence of the welfare state. Nevertheless, Thatcher read his critique of contemporary social science and kept her annotated copy among her speech ideas papers. Wilding claimed that whereas the nineteenth-century 'idiom' attributed responsibility to individuals for their success or failure, 'environmental and social' explanations had become dominant in the twentieth century. This 'dominant idiom' meant that solutions were not aimed at changing attitudes but instead focused on better systems and planning and encouraged the general application of statistical rules to groups. This 'stress on systems and forces implies and encourages a denigration of man' [Thatcher's underlining] and when applied to issues like delinquency contributed to 'weakening the sense of individual responsibility'.

These would have been familiar arguments, and no doubt some of Thatcher's interest lay in the potential to quote a member of the field. But Wilding's piece is interesting because it connects these critiques to other arguments about the limits of government action becoming popular among those associated with a neoliberal critique of social democracy. Social science, Wilding felt, had wrongly taken conflicts between groups outside of debate, implying they could be resolved 'a-politically' as social problems through further research and funding. It implied that the solutions were technocratic and most damagingly 'contribute[d] to excessive optimism about what can be achieved through government action'. Explicitly connecting his claims with Anthony King's 'overload' thesis, Wilding wrote that the result was that 'governments have taken on an ever-widening range of responsibilities; but sadly, to use King's phrase, the reach of British government has exceeded its grasp'. Key to understanding the relationship between Conservatism and neoliberalism in 1970s Britain, then, is that it was not just members of either tradition who connected the arguments together.

Some of the annotations on Wilding's article indicate a wider practice of political reading that characterises Thatcher's engagement with these texts. There are few instances where we can be certain an annotation indicates assent or dissent, but the general patterning indicates that Thatcher read new information through the lens of her own party's traditions. Her annotation of an article by a leading American neoconservative, Irving Kristol, illustrates this point, as well as showing that she read neoliberal texts in the context of neoconservative authors attempting to couple neoliberal policies with social conservatism.

Ostensibly an 'obituary' for socialism, Kristol's real purpose was to outline the challenge facing liberal capitalism in a post-socialist world.⁷⁵ Socialism had been 'a necessary idea' because it offered 'elements that were wanting in capitalist society'. Its original 'utopian' advocates offered a secular version of a valid criticism also made by the Church:

The essential point of this indictment was that liberty was not enough. A society founded solely on 'individual rights' was a society that ultimately deprived men of those virtues which could only exist in a political community which is something other than a 'society'. Among these virtues are a sense of distributive justice, a fund of shared moral values, and a common vision of the good life. [Thatcher's underlining]

Capitalist thinkers had not denigrated these values, but they had taken for granted the '**moral and spiritual heritage of Judaism and Christianity** [bold indicates Thatcher's paragraph/line marking]' and assumed that the '**new individualism of bourgeois society**' would not disturb this. Using a line of argument familiar to British Conservatives through the writings of T. S. Eliot, Kristol argued that capitalism had been '**able to live off the accumulated moral and spiritual capital of the past**'. However, this heritage had been spread thinner and was now bankrupt, leaving 'a spirit of nihilism' that not only dismissed traditions but also replaced the very idea of the 'good life' with the commodified 'lifestyle'.

Kristol's essay then launched into a narrative of scientific socialism's embrace of materialism, detailing how its inadequacies led to a spiral in which social democratic parties' left wings demanded ever greater control, eventually culminating in a political crisis that would either produce an authoritarian regime or liberal capitalist reaction. Thatcher no doubt welcomed his prediction that Britain was about to go down the latter path, but this still left the question: '**what can liberal capitalist society do to inoculate itself against a resurgence of anti-capitalist dissent?**' Kristol saw two areas for action. Firstly, such an inoculation could be brought about by reforming welfare to stress individual choice. The welfare state was not popular in and of itself; it reflected a 'demand for a greater minimum of political community, for more "social justice" (i.e. distributive justice), than capitalism, in its pristine, individualistic form, can provide'. In Kristol's view, a mix of voluntary and compulsory insurance schemes – those developed by neoliberal thinkers – would satisfy support for the welfare state and make such provision compatible with a liberal capitalist society. In a second area, though, 'the decline of

religious beliefs and traditional values', there were fewer answers because the decline stemmed from liberal capitalism's willingness to confine such questions to private affairs. Without resolving this question, though, Kristol warned that any revival of liberal capitalism would remain fragile, leaving socialism 'putrefying' rather than seeing it 'dead and buried'.

A text such as this is important for understanding the interface between neoliberals and Conservatives for several reasons. It again suggests that we need to look beyond the 'neoliberal' international thought collective towards wider neoconservative networks. Indeed, it suggests that British Conservatives were exposed to neoconservatives' efforts to connect their own arguments to neoliberal policies.⁷⁶ This particular example also shows that Conservatives had access to different ways of thinking about the relationship between morality and neoliberal policies. Kristol does not position the two as in conflict; instead, the re-moralisation of public life and neoliberal reforms are presented as solutions to capitalism's weaknesses. Finally, it exposes the difficulty of reading the relationship between Conservatism and neoliberalism as a contrast between national and international influences. Kristol's piece was international in scope and published in an Australian magazine. However, most of its arguments had a history within British Conservatism, and it is interesting that most of Thatcher's annotations pick up lines she would have been familiar with through her national party discourse.

Conclusion

Just as historians are now exploring the development of international neoliberalism in a wider range of contexts,⁷⁷ the time has come to explore the relationship between British Conservatism and neoliberalism outside the context of explaining the origins and policies of Thatcher's governments. This does not mean abandoning the 1970s and 1980s. We should recognise, though, that the concepts used to understand those decades' politics can cloud rather than clarify the relationship between neoliberals and Conservatives in earlier periods. Instead, historians might explore (and explain) not the influence of one tradition on the other, but the developments in both traditions of argument that increased *potential* points of compatibility, regardless of whether these arguments led members of each tradition to the same policies.

An important guard against the potential for teleology in that approach is to better define the agency involved in using those potential points of connection. Acquiring a better view of the interface between

neoliberalism and Conservatism in the late 1970s marks a first step in that direction. This chapter suggests that interface should be characterised as one which was Conservative in outlook and keen to select arguments that helped resolve rhetorical problems confronting the party. It carried plenty of other traffic alongside 'neoliberal' ideas, partly because those involved had their own socially conservative views and partly because the networks these individuals were connected to included neoconservatives trying to build links between moral conservatism and liberal economics. But as well as bringing some of the tensions between Conservatism and neoliberalism into the former 'at source', Conservative leaders were exposed to readings of neoliberalism or wider texts that resolved such tensions. Other parts of the interface indicate the importance of 'reinforcement' texts and selective reading through the lens of established national traditions. This is not a complete picture of the interface between neoliberalism and Conservatism, but it does indicate that some of the factors shaping their relationship become clearer when we step back from the question of policy influence to ask how the routes through which politicians experienced contact between these traditions may have affected their view of how the two could be brought together.

Finally, this chapter shows the utility of Jackson's wider suggestion in this volume that we treat the analysis of political speech and intellectual history as complementary. I would argue that the best way of achieving that integration without making one the master of the other is to forgo a search for individual 'neoliberal' lines in speeches. Instead, we should re-examine the interfaces where neoliberalism and Conservatism met, stressing how the particularities of each point of contact worked with longer-term developments to shape exchanges between the casts of political and intellectual histories.

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