

Thatcher (1987) claimed that ‘there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families’. Critique Thatcher’s (1987) statement above from a modern-day perspective. (Use theory and policy to support your work).

Margaret Thatcher was the first woman Prime Minister appointed in the UK, holding office from 1979 to 1990. Such was her political dominance throughout the 1980s; she would eventually become synonymous and even personify the decade (Campbell, 2011). Having already made a name for herself in roles such as Education Secretary, it was as Prime Minister she really established her own brand of transformative politics. It was a turbulent – *often controversial* – time in British political history in which she presided over the miner’s strike and the Falklands War, before arguably ending her reign following the introduction of the infamous ‘poll’ tax. According to Berlinski (2011), it was Thatcher’s deep hatred for socialism that motivated her political ideology, at a time when the country was very much in decline and unemployment was high. It was not solely political, it was also very personal and it was that passion for change that meant she was both revered and reviled.

With this in mind, it was in an interview for *Women’s Own* magazine in 1987 – *shortly after winning her third term* – in which Thatcher’s statement on the absence of society appeared. Albertson and Stepney (2019) assert that although Thatcher was renowned for neoliberal policies, but to fixate purely on economics is to ignore the wider objectives. The welfare reforms and policies for expanding home ownership, they suggest, were attempts to remodel the very soul of the British people, with economic ideology merely the platform with which to facilitate the transformation. Johansen (2016) however, believes the statement was less about empowerment and self-determination and was in fact, an attempt by government to reject what they viewed as a culture of privilege. A dangerous supposition given that the fabric of many communities at that time had already become fragile, but also somewhat hypocritical. The neoliberal political agenda did not reject entitlement outright, but was rather selective in who should benefit, a notion that Bridges (2017) refers to as the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor. Although there has been an appetite for class-based affirmative action among political conservatives, in reality, they have produced little in the way of policy to improve the well-being of those deemed ‘deserving’, i.e., individuals who have found themselves impoverished through no fault of their own.

Never lacking ambition but all-too-often contradictory, there were shortcomings in policy implementation, described as “the gulf between its ambitions and its achievements” (Gamble, 1994, p. 208). Reforms were regularly at odds with many traditional conservatives, who were ideologically opposed to any attempt at undermining or fundamentally changing the established state mechanisms. Divisiveness became a running theme through the Thatcher administration, something that Espiet-Kilty (2015) suggests was still evident at the time of her death in 2013, highlighting the level of discord at a time when the passing of such a public figure would normally be accompanied by some degree of unity. Going on to hypothesise that the reason may have been, despite having left office some thirteen years previous, Thatcherism – *or at least its legacy* – was still very much alive.

That legacy in terms of social impact is arguably most evident in the former mining communities. A bolstered majority following the 1983 general election, had given the government a strong mandate, something that Buckley (2015) believes provided them with an opportunity to deal with one particular thorn in their side. A showdown had been brewing between the government and the miners – *or perhaps more precisely, the miners unions* – long before the election. Unemployment was high and disruptions meant unrest was growing amongst the government and public alike. A series of long-running strikes were planned from 1984-85, but the chaotic way in which they were organised, played perfectly into the government’s hands. Initially, the only recourse would have been the use of civil sanctions, but the failure to secure the backing of a national ballot allowed the government to introduce more punitive measures through greater police powers. Gifford (1986) infers the intention was not merely to end the strikes, but to break the unions and spirit of the miner’s themselves. Amid individual accusations of violence and abuse of power, there were also wider implications regarding civil liberties in general.

Taken within the context of that *Women’s Own* interview just two years later, what might the sociological implications be for the individuals affected by such a traumatic time in British political history. According to Spence (1998), when the Vane Tempest Colliery in County Durham closed its pits for the final time in 1993, women were very much at the forefront of campaigning, not because they were directly involved in mining, but because they understood the social implications of what a pit closure meant for a close-knit community. Having played an important role during the miner’s strikes of the 80s, the memories were still all-too-raw. They had witnessed first-hand the first wave of pit closures and less mines meant fewer

activists, only exacerbating the struggle. To go from being a community with a strong working-class identity to one of mass unemployment, could be seen as an identity crisis in itself. A notion shared by Buckley (2015), who made comparisons between the plight miners in the 80s, as opposed to those who found themselves unemployed the decade previous. In the 1970s, unemployment rates were much lower and it was far easier those who found themselves suddenly bereft of work to then diversify. Furthermore Beatty, Fothergill and Powell (2007), note that twenty years on, although there has been a marked upturn in employment prospects across a number of historical mining communities but the recovery, strong though it is, by no means offsets the substantial job losses suffered in those areas and cite evidence of what they term as ‘hidden unemployment’. The masking of employment figures across the mining communities of England and Wales became the focus of a study using longitudinal data from the ONS. Fieldhouse and Hollywood (1999) believe official unemployment figures for industry were artificially low due to methods of labour market absorption. Many of those no longer classed as unemployed were forced into early retirement or registered as long-term sick and although the statistics appeared lower, there was a sharp rise in workforce numbers for those listed as ‘inactive’.

Even today, in former mining communities, there remains a sense of neglect, not just by the Thatcher administration, but by successive governments. Wray (2009) puts forward the case of Co. Durham in the north east, as one such example. An area once home to the largest colliery in the UK and a thriving industrial community, the last pit eventually closed its doors for the last time in 1993. The closure left the Durham Miner’s Association (DMA) – *a once powerful trade union* – with no one to represent and no one with which to negotiate. It could have signalled the end of the DMA, but after years of decline, it has seen a remarkable resurgence. The annual gala is a major event and is always well attended, perhaps unsurprising given that the membership still numbers in excess of 15,000, all of whom are local ex-miners and retain a sense of solidarity in what has been referred to as ‘community unionism’. Wills (2001) makes reference to the theory and practice of community unionism as a transfer of power from the workplace to the wider community. As the power of unions has gradually been eroded through legislation and deregulation, diversity in the workforce has increased and there has been a gradual shift towards grassroots community organisations tackling issues of inequality and social justice. Tattersall (2008) argues that this concept is far from new and is instead a return to, or resurgence of, community collaboration that had once

given rise to the establishment of trade unions. This could be a case in point for Thatcher's assertion that it is the duty of individuals and communities to provide their own safety net of support, rather than rely on government for handouts and assistance. It could also be argued that this display of community solidarity is what constitutes society. For De Landa (2019), it is a question of ontology and whether society as a whole is viewed on a micro or purely macro level, not a question of individuals or society, but rather individuals as socially constructed products of their environment. A view shared by conflict theorists and functionalists, alike. Dobbin, Simmons and Garrett (2007) theorise that the problem with policies surrounding issues such as education and rights, is that they are largely driven by trends and whether that is regionally or globally, success is dependent on the presence of a suitable framework.

Debate remains as to whether the UK was ready for the scope of privatisation introduced under Thatcher, a policy that has proven to be both contentious and controversial. To some, the expansion of the free market economy stands as monumental turning point. Edwards (2018) cites the UK government under Thatcher as being instrumental in driving a global privatisation revolution, increasing living standards, promoting innovation and improving the quality of services. This is a view however, not shared by all. Berry (2013) argues that privatization and neo-liberalism more generally, is camouflaging inadequate government practice and masking a critical lack of resource or strategy. This became more evident after the global financial crash of 2008, with 'trickle-down' economics already failing and further exacerbated by global recession. When Thatcher resigned in 1990, her successor John Major maintained the ethos of short-term gain from private sector investment and in 1992, introduced the Private Finance Initiative (PFI), a policy that also continued when New Labour came to power in 1997. Although this helped to deliver vital infrastructure in the form of new hospitals, according to Raco (2013), the long term impact was extremely damaging. PFI hospital contracts in Norwich meant local taxpayers were forced to find over £300m to buy out the remaining contracts to avoid crippling repayments. Under Treasury guidelines, PFI contracts are not considered public debt and as such are omitted from government borrowing figures, masking the true level national debt. Opportunity it would appear comes at a price.

Progressive housing policies also presented opportunities and midway through her premiership, the 'Right to Buy' policy was introduced through the *Housing Act (1985)*. Jones

and Muriel (2006) explored the flagship policy 25 years on from its introduction to evaluate the social implications. The benefit for those tenants who could afford to purchase was clearly evident, with many of them receiving substantial discounts due to the length of tenancy. The scheme was seen as an otherwise unobtainable opportunity for social mobility, a chance to own a considerable asset, with long tenancies providing instant equity. Some critics however, particularly in the then Labour opposition, saw it as a cynical attempt to win votes. The policy has been widely criticised in recent times for the overall reduction in affordable housing, with greatly reduced housing opportunities through local authorities, particularly for young people. According to Edwards (2017), in 1981 almost a third of British homes were owned by local authorities, but due to the housing reform, that figure had dropped to around 7% by 2016. In an article for *The Guardian*, Collinson (2017) asserted that around 40% of properties sold under the scheme were now owned by private landlords. In some areas, such as Milton Keynes, it was as high as 70% and landlords were on average charging twice as much for rental, compared with local councils. There were wider reaching socioeconomic implications caused by perceptions in class mobility. Watt (1996) proposes that housing status is a key factor in social stratification and despite the concept of social classes having gradually eroded over time, the divisions remain. If the intention was to promote self-determination, re-stratification in some sense, quite clearly created community divides.

To declare that there is no such thing as society implies that society itself is something tangible, a measurable article that can be sufficiently defined. Shaw (1993) puts forward the premise that 'society' is merely an abstract concept for describing relational interactions between groups, whether that is on a micro level or in a wider global context. Individual responsibility and social cohesion are far from mutually exclusive and in many ways divisive policies have strengthened communities through activism. The Thatcher government could surely not have foreseen the backlash when they introduced a regressive tax, in what became known informally as the Poll Tax (*The Community Charges (Administration and Enforcement) Regulations, 1985*). The public reaction to the introduction of a tax that took no account of ability to pay galvanised, almost instantly, collective community action. This is illustrated by Stone (2020) in research surrounding the Anti-Poll Tax Movement (APTM). At the time the Labour opposition party were urging people to wait for the next election to overturn the legislation, but activists were already forming groups and networking ready for mass protest. Having exhausted political avenues through council meetings and union

consultations, resistance eventually culminated in a mass protest with a march to Trafalgar Square in 1990. Initially peaceful, there were suggestions of heavy-handed policing from some and infiltration of troublemakers from others. As the day went on the protest erupted into violence and eventually rioting. Despite widespread condemnation of the violent scenes in London, the mass protest was seen as the end of the Poll Tax which was replaced with a more progressive Council Tax and perhaps more pertinently; it was also seen as major contributory factor in the demise of the Thatcher administration. The response by public and authorities alike is still the subject of much debate; something that Stone (2020) believes is a testament to the success and the potency of the APTM.

The Community Charge may have been defeated but there were unintended consequences resulting from the action. When the nation returned to the polls for the 1992 general election, the Conservatives were quite widely expected to lose. Gibbs (2016) proposes that although they were punished in some constituencies, particularly those in areas with high rates of Community Charge, the resistance to payment of the tax may have handed them victory inadvertently. Refusing to register on the electoral roll had been a deliberate tactic to avoid being traced for payment. Mclean and Smith (1994) also make this point, emphasising that such action was likely to disproportionately affect those less inclined to vote Conservative. An article in *The Guardian* (1999) reported on figures from the electoral roll in England which saw a fall of around 85,000 in 1989, despite having risen by approximately 200,000 in each of the previous 10 years. Having reached a peak of 36.5m the previous year, it would take a further 6 years before it reached that level again which, coincidentally, was the year after the Community Charge was eventually abandoned.

In conclusion, it would appear somewhat problematic to determine the motives or meaning behind Margaret Thatcher's quote. Bawden and Robinson (2013) disagree with the statement on the grounds that no matter how individual and unique our behaviour is, it is ultimately a result of our social interactions. Individualism not only exists within a societal construct, it is inherently shaped by it. Bawden and Robinson (2013) also reference the subsequent statement that appeared in the *Sunday Times* on July 10, 1988 in which No. 10 sought to provide clarity regarding the original remarks, "society as such does not exist except as a concept. Society is made up of people." (Margaret Thatcher Foundation, 2021). A statement that appears somewhat contradictory. Kitching (2020) elaborates that by labelling society as a 'thing', it suggests something tangible and measureable, but a concept nevertheless can still

be a conceptual truth and that society as a concept is no less valid than that of a 'free market' economy. Furthermore Lau, Smith and Fiske (1991), propose that individual political beliefs will always influence how we interpret policies and often policy changes are merely a deliberate attempt to appeal to certain values, rather than a genuine attempt to change the political discourse.

Understanding the motive behind the words is possibly more pertinent than establishing whether or not the statement is factually true. Without knowing for certain the substantive sentiment, it is perhaps only through Thatcher's political legacy that we are able to gain some insight. Murie (2016) cites the 'Right to Buy' housing policy as a case in point. The scheme had its merits in terms of social mobility but was open to abuse and in the long-term, has probably contributed significantly to the current housing crisis. There are fewer opportunities now for social housing, private rent has increased faster than wages and the money raised was not reinvested. Pierson (1995) suggests that far from ending state dependency, it has instead slowly shifted from public to private, with extortionate rent being subsidised by housing benefit to private sector landlords. Viewing the policy in hindsight however, although seen by many as a failure, does not constitute proof that it was ill-intentioned. (Albertson and Stepney, 2019) make the point that Thatcher was simultaneously voted both best and worst prime minister, and that even though 60% (Ipsos Mori, 2013) disapproved of her personally, 52% felt her government tenure had been a success. Success or failure though, did that statement herald a change of approach? Was there a sudden epiphany which resulted in a change in tact? Exploring Thatcher's policies, even as far back as 1971 when – *as Secretary of State for Education* – she earned the infamous moniker 'Margaret Thatcher, milk snatcher', in reference to her withdrawal of free school milk for 7 to 11 year olds (Stewart, 2013). This example appears to indicate a consistency in policy, if nothing else.

Aside from the ambiguity that can arise when analysing individual statements, it could also prove difficult to evaluate the underlying thoughts and motives, whilst remaining objective. When critiquing such a divisive and prominent figure, the presence of some degree of political bias – *if only subconscious* – is perhaps somewhat inevitable. A series of online studies by Suhay and Erisen (2018) into politically motivated reasoning – *or bias assimilation* – concluded that information was considerably easier to accept if compatible with our political ideology. A high percentage of participants experienced anger and negative emotions when presented with propositions that undermined their own values. Harrison

(2020) undertook a similar using empirical data to assess moral dispositions in relation to political interest, with comparable results. Democratic frustration was also a factor, with perceived injustices of democracy fostering mistrust and further skewing issues of political bias. Furthermore, Freeman *et al.* (2020), assert that is this kind of manifestation of government distrust that has lead to the conspiracy theories that undermine government policies, such as is evident in the government policies surrounding the response to Covid-19 corona virus.

So, taking into consideration the wealth of research and potential psychological influences, the evidence appears inconclusive and largely dependent upon an individual's personal paradigm. There will undoubtedly be further discourse and the legacy of Margaret Thatcher will likely remain the subject of debate for many years to come.

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