

Thatcher (1987) claimed that: ‘there is no such thing as society. There are men and women and their families’. The purpose of this essay is to critique Thatcher’s (1987) statement above from a modern-day perspective.

This quote is part of a longer interview which took place in 1987 for Women’s Own Magazine. Thatcher goes on to explain how she believes people have a sense of entitlement that does not correspond to the role of government and that it was responsibility of each person to look after themselves, their family and then to help others (Thatcher, 1987). And although Thatcher has been widely criticized for saying there is no such thing as society, the quote has been re-stated by later prime ministers: David Cameron in 2005 in his victory speech declared ‘there is such a thing as society, it’s just not the same thing as the state’ (BBC News, 2005) and Boris Johnson in 2020 during the Covid19 pandemic stated ‘there really is such a thing as society’ (The Guardian, 2020) both making reference to Thatcher’s quote from 1987.

Thatcher entered her new position as Prime Minister just after what is known as the ‘Winter of Discontent’, which had climaxed in union riots and frustration after the government had placed cash limits on the public sector (Jackson, 2014). The pressures forming from the working class and trade unions exposed a new and changing political scene (Martin, 2009). The strikes had arisen because of wage restraints placed by government as an attempt to control inflation levels and was intended to underpin the road to economic recovery (Rodgers, 1984). This macroeconomic strategy of the labour government however failed when in 1979 Thatcher gained a majority of votes and became the first female Prime Minister of the UK, with ‘the promise to restore balance of power in favour of the people’ (Jackson, 2014, pg.270).

The economic system has been described as a belief system that has been constructed by individuals with a specific motive, at a specific time, for a specific reason and is guided by those who have the power to manipulate the said system (Lukes, 2013). Schutz recognised the motivational relevance that appears from a person’s interest at a particular time in a particular situation (Lock and Strong, 2010, pg. 37) and as a historical economic power, the UK has persistently focussed on economic growth and status of the country worldwide however has neglected to find a way to raise the living standards of those living within its borders (Blakemore and Warwick Booth, 2013). As the UK continued to strive for influence within Europe, global competitiveness took precedence alongside the modernizing of the government (Kreiger, 1999).

During the years of Thatcher as Prime Minister, the understanding of monetarism changed as it began to be applied in a new fashion (Backhouse, 2002). This macroeconomic idea and subsequent policies were primarily influenced by economist Milton Friedman. The aim of the policies endeavoured to control the money supply which was displayed in the Medium Term Financial Strategy of 1980 and this framework aimed ‘to bring down the rate of inflation and to create conditions for a sustainable growth of output and employment’ (Champroux and Sowels, 2015, pg. 132). Monetarism and the Medium Term Financial Strategy persistently led to policies that encouraged free markets, privatisation and introduced the idea of marketisation in the educational sector through the Education Reform Act 1988, increasing the competition between students and schools (Bailey, 1995). And education became another area within the economy, offering higher rewards to higher ranked schools, and where governments get to decide how to invest and spend on education (Pettigrew, 2014). These new policies, including financial market deregulation, consequently, saw unexpected results that made the goal of monetarism unattainable however had led to new academic successes (Bateman, 2002).

These monetarist decisions of the Thatcher government increased unemployment and in the short run this became strategy had actually become part of the solution, despite the negative and long-term effects (Mishra, 2014). These decisions and historical trends have had a profound influence upon families across the UK and following generations (Spicker, 2008). William Beveridge, a key figure in laying the foundations of the welfare state in 1942, fought against what he labelled the evils of society (Haralambos and Holburn, 2013). The aim of Beveridge was to try and break the poverty wheel trap and to enable individuals and families of society to tackle health issues, which would then enable them to work and the hope of a better standard of living (Blakemore and Warwick Booth, 2013). However, in contrast to Beveridge, Friedrich Hayek was an Austrian economist, who influenced many of Thatcher’s microeconomic policies, including privatisation, suggested that inequalities were just a natural and welcomed characteristic element of a capitalist society which should be encouraged for competition and higher achievement (Backhouse, 2002).

Thatcher was of this same thought and believed that those who relied on the welfare system were lazier than those who did not and welcomed the level of inequality produced as an encouragement to achieve better and work harder (McSmith, 2010). Rates of inequality had been seen to be reducing across the United Kingdom (UK) before Thatcher’s first term, however a large increase of inequality fabricated during her power and has remained high since

(Mishra, 2014). Her understanding was that people were choosing the welfare system instead of going to work and paying their taxes. And this lifestyle was one that Thatcher could not comprehend to be right or acceptable and so with this quote tried to make the concept more relatable and relational by stating that the money claimed on benefits was paid by those who did work and pay taxes and therefore 'society was not an abstract entity' (Copp, 1992, p.183). It was believed that the rich should not have to share or in some way look after the poor but that wealth should be redistributed and decrease the amount of people using the welfare state. Thatcher stood strongly upon her ideology of individual responsibility and her outlook reflected quite honestly across her policies (Jackson, 2014).

An ideological perspective reflects values and is very important within politics, decision making and policy making. The complexity of systems and lives become enslaved to the ideology, personal ideals and development of those in power (Blakemore and Warwick Booth, 2013). Ideologies, morals and value judgement however are created through life experience and patterns of thought reflect the society by which surrounds the individual (Mannheim, 2015). The functions of society, as Durkheim acknowledged, are shaped by collective social facts that influence individual and group behaviour (Dillon, 2014). Therefore, the divisions of labour are shaped and affected by the societal forces that have taken place beforehand (Dudley, 1978) recognising that injustice should not be allowed to occur across social roles and functions (Lukas, 2013).

With time however comes change, where individuals and families have to develop along with the development of globalisation, the global economy and decisions made by politicians (Dillon, 2014). The focus of responsibility regarding the welfare state and social security have been and are still widely discussed and yet, it has long been noted that the current capitalist system benefits a few individuals rather than a majority worldwide, however the system has power and control that considering restructuring would be difficult in such a global world (Mishra, 2014). However, the rise of global networks and a global economy presents a challenge for reconstructing the system as powerful individuals, businesses and countries are interlinked within this one global system (Blakemore and Warwick Booth, 2013). 'The economy constructs our ideas and is constructed by our ideas' (Weintraub, 1999, pg.150).

Inequality and poverty relate to more than just a hard life with no money: it is a culture that has profoundly divided the UK, however Dorling (2019) explains that some of the injustices we

see and live today are a result of solutions found for past injustices. However, the reality remains that unemployment and inequality rates are high with ‘around one in six people living in relative low income’ (Parliament. House of Commons, 2020, pg.4). It is not only income inequality that persists but inequalities in health, education, location, etc. and inequalities today are higher than during the 1970’s including intergenerational inequalities that see young people in difficulty of accumulating wealth and stability (IFS, 2019).

In an attempt to secure a better future that provides stability and fosters greater equality, the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 was presented and is underpinned by the concept of sustainable development (Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, 2017). The aim of sustainable development is to ensure that decisions made today do not disadvantage individuals, families and communities now or in the future (WCED, 1987). This law recognises that external factors influence the lives and wellbeing of individuals, families and communities (Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, 2017). Although there is a movement in politics and policies to show that quality of life is important, the reality remains very much similar as before the Act was given acceptance. A reoccurring reason for this is the cost of welfare alongside decisions to cut the funds, leaving many people going hungry, relying on food banks and living day to day on the breadline (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

Margaret Thatcher may not be wrong in saying that society is a collection of men, women and their families, however society is also much more than this. Individuals interact with each other and are also subject to the conditions in which they live and the opportunities available to them (Blakemore and Warwick-Booth, 2013). The opportunities or disadvantages that families and societies face are in many cycles dependent upon the decisions made by government or political bodies (Mishra, 2014). And Thatcher was just another component to the cycle to the capitalist system, who made decisions based on her ideology, belief systems and understanding of the world (Lock and Strong, 2010). Capitalism is indeed interwoven into every area of the lived experience and although for a majority of people this system is not one of freedom and equality, it is a system that cannot be escaped (Blakemore and Warwick-Booth, 2013). This said, the social and sociocultural areas of society will continue to evolve and undergo changes as humanity is in constant look out to change their present into a better a future (Dillon, 2013). And yet, changes perceived as necessary will highly depend on background, experiences, and worldview of that particular society and people within. Finally, it must be acknowledged, that

for any government in a changing world, trying to find the boundary of state responsibility is complex and a hard decision to make (Jackson, 2014).

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