

MARGARET THATCHER'S AMERICAN DREAM:  
ORIGINS AND OUTCOMES

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ABSTRACT

The article describes Mrs Thatcher's efforts to bring the examples she saw in American government, business, labour markets, education and much else besides, to her great project of 'modernising' Britain, destroying its postwar collectivism, and thereby – she believed – reversing her nation's long-term economic and political decline. Going beyond the traditional geopolitical conception of the 'special' Anglo-American relationship, the analysis traces the mechanisms used to transfer policy models from the US to Britain, and relates something of the impact and reception of these efforts, in government and the wider society. Most contemporary observers believed Thatcher's impact would be temporary, but succeeding prime ministers all followed in her path, relentlessly trying a form of top-down Americanization of British governance, economic performance, education, media etc. While later experts were sceptical – 'the Britishness of British life was still much in evidence' – the other face of her pro-Americanism, aggressive Euro-scepticism, undoubtedly created an enduring legacy.

**Keywords:** Thatcherism, Monetarism, British politics, Americanization, Policy Transfer, Euro-scepticism.  
JEL codes: B, H, N.

AMERICA AND THE THATCHERITE CRUSADE FOR BRITISH RENEWAL – AN  
INTRODUCTION

The 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Mrs Thatcher's 1979 general election victory and her arrival as Prime Minister was the occasion for a vast discussion in

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the British media of her political, personal and moral heritage. A new documentary series on her story started on BBC TV in May, 2019. The third volume of a monumental authorised biography, by a leading Conservative journalist – the first was published in 2013 right after her death – came out in September of that year. The entire work was condensed and serialised on BBC Radio in October. In explicit political terms, every candidate in the competition for the Tory leadership of June-July 2019 was identified by the political commentators as a Thatcherite (Beckett: 2019). As tradition required, references to Thatcher were heard once more at the Tory party conference in September (Patel: 2019). Her legacy was openly contested in the 2019 general election campaign (*Financial Times* 2019).<sup>1</sup>

By this time no-one doubted that during the long eleven years of her premiership in the 1980's, Mrs Thatcher had set off an unprecedented wave of change in the way the relationship between the state and society worked in Britain. Indeed *change* became the mantra of every succeeding British Prime Minister down to the moment when the nation entered the long tunnel of Brexit in 2016. A well-known political satirist compiled a video-montage of Blair, Brown and Cameron all preaching the change message – often using exactly the same words as each other – to the peoples of the nation (Iannucci: 2006). But compared to the dogmatic pragmatists who succeeded her, Mrs Thatcher appeared to be a leader uniquely inspired by moral and ideologically-based *convictions*. By the time in 1985 when she made the extraordinary and unprecedented declaration that her mission was to “destroy socialism in this country” (*Financial Times*: 1985, 1986) the British had almost become accustomed to the new radicalism she brought to every traditional idea of ‘Conservatism’. They had realised how seriously she sought to substitute those notions with a vision of an individualistic, entrepreneurial, minimal-state society, which would try to overturn every established hierarchy and conception of power, whether of left or right.

In reality Thatcherism, said most political commentators, at the time and afterwards, did not exist as a coherent body of thought: it was something she invented as she went along. What the world got in the end was a rag-bag of beliefs and ideological currents – even contradictory – which the ‘Iron Lady’ expressed using a distinctive personal mix of instinct, intellect and force of personality (Jackson and Saunders: 2012, 12-14; Moore: 2013, 536; Campbell: 1987). “The right definition”, wrote her long-serving Treasury Minister (Chancellor of the Exchequer) in his memoirs, “involves a mixture of free markets, financial discipline, firm control over public ex-

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<sup>1</sup> This was an editorial attacking the Labour Party's declared policy of re-nationalising former state-owned companies privatised by Thatcher.

penditure, nationalism, 'Victorian values' (of the... self-help variety), privatization and a dash of populism. A subsequent formulation... was the recreation of the 'enterprise culture' in the UK. The model in this case was the United States" (Lawson 1993: 64).

"The most novel aspect of Thatcherism", wrote the pioneering cultural sociologist Stuart Hall in 1988, "was indeed the very way in which it *combined* [sic] the new doctrines of the free market with some of the traditional emphases of organic Toryism": personal responsibility, tradition, Englishness, patriarchy, family, the nation and its inherited institutions. Thatcher as a politician was exceptional, said Hall, because of her ability to reconcile a certain philosophical approach with what was generally taken as common sense: "to translate the high nostrums of monetarism and the free market into the homespun idiom of the Tory householder" (Hall 1988: 38, 39, 59).<sup>2</sup>

But what conventional analyses and political debate on the Thatcher period do not discuss at all is the prominence of American inspirations and precedents in the Prime Minister's great crusade to reform and 'modernise' her country. Ever since World War II the British governing class had been looking for some new source of power to replace those which history had forced them to discard. Mrs Thatcher believed that in her own person, by the force of her example, her beliefs, and her results – her 'agency' – the country might once more make its impress on the rest. Among those beliefs was the centrality of the so-called "Special Relationship", between the UK and the US – as identified by Winston Churchill after World War II – in her great drive to re-launch Britain's strength, identity, and sense of purpose in the world.

My aim in this paper however is to go beyond the familiar territory of Anglo-American geopolitical relations in the Thatcher-Reagan era, an emotional and moral landscape much exalted by the lady herself, especially after both she and Reagan had left power (Thatcher: 2002). Instead the point here is to highlight the development of Thatcher's determination to *make Britain more like America*: to reform traditional British institutions, attitudes, expectations, public morality, business practice, education, the media, and anything else she could get her hands on in ways which replicated what she believed she saw going on in America, and which undoubtedly she did see in the gilded, Republican circles she invariably moved in (Thatcher 2019; Moore 2019: 816-817). Whether she succeeded or not is another question. To answer it, one would have to take into account Blair and Brown's later efforts along exactly the same lines: they are certainly among her successes

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<sup>2</sup> The importance of the concept of personal responsibility in Thatcherism is emphasised in RODGERS 2011: 29.

(Kavanagh 2003; Ellwood 2004). But the fact remains that ignoring this American aspect of Thatcher's self-proclaimed revolution is to underestimate radically its potential, its ambitions and its impact.

Yet it seems as though British historians and social commentators don't even want to think about the implications of the style of 'modernisation' Thatcher set in motion in Britain. Some of them know there was an American dimension in the Prime Minister's action – J.R.G. Thomlinson, writing on Thatcher and education in 1989, said: "Thinking and action in the USA has perhaps been the most influential on government during the 1980s" – but there is no sustained discourse, no narrative, and not a trace of analysis (Thomlinson 1989: 186). An eminent sociologist of religion writing in the same collection of essays on the impact of Thatcherism – still an indispensable source – asserted that: "The new Tories are not in the aristocratic mould [typical of the old Conservative Party], but are hungry men – and women – preaching a kind of populism. Broadly they seek the Americanization of English culture" ... but again there is no development of this line of thought (Martin 1989: 336). The prominent *Guardian* commentator Will Hutton wrote in 2002 of Thatcher's "two-fold mission: to pull down the social-democratic settlement [the post-war welfare state] and construct in its place a simulacrum of the United States" (Hutton 2002: 267). Yet he has never developed this judgment, whose implications are surely quite radical. As late as 2015 one could find a leading *Financial Times* columnist, Janan Ganesh, talking – with plenty of evidence – of the "transatlantic delusions" of the Westminster governing élite, of a 'politico-media class become more mesmerised by its American equivalent with each generation', but this appears to be his only reflection on the topic (Ganesh 2015). Was this the sort of legacy Mrs Thatcher was looking for?

#### THE ORIGINS OF THE THATCHERITE LOVE AFFAIR WITH AMERICA

Although Mrs Thatcher's memoirs do not confirm this judgment, her year 2000 biographer, John Campbell, suggests that her

opinions of the United States were formed on a basic level by her appreciation of American sacrifices during the Second World... her life-long commitment to the Atlantic alliance, in contrast to her disdain for the other nations of Europe, were perspectives that were formed during her teenage years in Grantham [the provincial English town where she was born and grew up] in the 1940s. Although her commitment to maintaining a world role for Britain via the Empire never faltered, America was to be the partner in this endeavour, itself the leading example for progress, freedom, and prosperity (Campbell 2000: 41, 82, 90-91).

In 2013 her official biographer, Charles Moore, recounted how an early electoral speech in 1951, when Thatcher was 26 years old, “contained the germ of her later developed belief that the ‘English-speaking peoples’ [again, a Churchillian concept] alone could ensure freedom and security: “Britain [she said]... must be strong, strong in arms and strong in faith in her own way of life. The greatest hope for peace lies in friendship and co-operation with the United States of America” (Moore 2013: 113).

The historian Giles Scott-Smith has explained how and why Margaret Thatcher first attracted the attention of the US Embassy as a politician with great potential in the mid-1960s, when the Labour Party was in power, and Mrs Thatcher filled the role of opposition spokesperson on taxation and economic affairs. The first encounter of official America with Mrs Thatcher came from the visits of the Embassy’s Political Officer, William Galloway, to the House of Commons, where he witnessed her “very strong will”, “high standards of ethics and morals”, “tremendous self-confidence”, and the fact that “she didn’t hesitate to express her views”. Galloway also noted that her somewhat aggressive approach did not exactly endear her to some of her colleagues, which clearly marked her out as “a politician who was not seeking support for her own personal advancement”. Nevertheless she was “the outstanding lady in the House of Commons at that time” (Scott-Smith 2003: 11).

Through this connection, Thatcher visited the US for the first time in 1967, as a guest of the International Visitor Programme, a long-running American public diplomacy scheme for identifying future leaders of their respective countries, who would in this way – hopefully – become sympathetic to America and its aims in the world. In her memoirs, Thatcher recalls:

The excitement which I felt has never really subsided. At each stopover I was met and accommodated by friendly, open, generous people who took me into their homes and lives and showed me their cities and townships with evident pride. The high point was my visit to the NASA Space Center at Houston (Thatcher 1995: 153-154).

There she found a British engineer at work: “a living example of the ‘brain drain’ from which over-regulated, over-taxed Britain was suffering”. In spite of the fact that NASA was a government agency, Thatcher saw a confirmation even there for her own ideological preferences: “there was no way Britain could compete even in more modest areas of technology if we did not learn the lessons of an enterprise economy” (*ibid.*).

Scott-Smith recounts how the official documents tell of the special treatment she received on the basis of the London Embassy’s (private) pre-

diction that she might indeed become Britain's first lady Prime Minister. Charles Moore, the biographer, provides a detailed account of the experience and the enthusiastic reception she received wherever she went. He also points to the 'political lessons she took back from her trip':

From that time on, her speeches began to draw on American examples. Within months of her return, she spoke...about the joys of America's simple tax forms for low earners, of its method for reviving the coal industry... of the (need) to protect personal privacy from government computers. Above all, she noticed the contrast between a society with bearable tax rates and free markets, and the alternative [realities then prevailing in Britain] (Moore 2013: 200).

A second visit, organised by a non-governmental organisation dedicated to the concept of the 'English-speaking peoples', took place in March 1969. But it was the September 1975 visit – very soon after Thatcher's election as Leader of the Opposition – which made the biggest impact on the lady herself and she on her high-ranking audience. The visitor was now a celebrity, and given easy access to "all the leading figures", as she explains in her memoirs (Thatcher 1995: 357). While anxious to insist that Britain had the resources to find its way out of the prevailing miasma under Labour, she was also – says Charles Moore – determined to launch "the language of freedom and liberty which she found very attractive in American politics... into British political debate, and saw her American trip as providing the time and place to do so". At the same time she was – says Moore – "searching for allies who would help validate the ideological and political change she sought at home" (Moore 2013: 312-313, 320).

This was where the work of the new, 1970s generation of transatlantic, conservative think-tanks contributed to what eventually emerged as 'Thatcherism'. Much has been made of this cultural background to Mrs Thatcher's 'revolution', and her presumed debt to a small group of institutes – in particular the Mont Pelerin society founded by Friedrich Hayek and others in 1947, the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA, 1955), and the Tory Party's own Centre for Policy Studies (CPS, 1974). The in-depth critique these centres developed of the post-war governance of Britain, their antagonism to the welfare state and the so-called 'mixed economy' and their devotion to neo-liberalism, all this has been well documented (Tribe 2009; Ledger 2018). The roots of these enterprises went back to the 1930s, as Richard Cockett demonstrated in his grand 1995 survey of them (Cockett 1995). But they achieved a new prominence in Britain with the 1970's collapse of the post-World War II era of continuous, high-level growth, and its allegedly Keynesian philosophical foundation (Matthijs 2011: 107-109). All the bodies which came into being then were conservative, and they were Anglo-American. The phenomenon, writes Richard Aldous

was part of a transatlantic revolution in politics and ideas. What the CPS did in Britain, the Heritage Foundation – the free market think tank set up in Washington DC in 1973 – did in America. The fact that the CPS and the Heritage Foundation were founded within a year of each other underlines just how closely intertwined was the intellectual development of economic liberalism in Britain and the United States” (Aldous 2012: 25-7).

Other research centres joined the party: the Adam Smith Institute in Britain, the American Enterprise Institute in the US. At the same time, long-established bodies like the Hoover Institution at Stanford were expanding and discovering economists such as Milton Friedman, and politicians such as Ronald Reagan. Aldous goes on:

Staff and ideas traversed the Atlantic easily and frequently. And they all worshipped at the altar of the Mont Pelerin Society, founded in 1947 with Hayek and Karl Popper (*ibid.*).

And yet at the end of a substantial examination of the records of the think-tanks, in an effort to discover the real political influence of these institutions and people on Margaret Thatcher, the historian Ben Jackson concludes that:

there is little archival evidence of the Thatcher of the 1970s as a neo-liberal ideologue... Whether she herself read or was even influenced by specifically neo-liberal ideas is hard to judge... More important is the fact that key advisors and ministers [before and after her rise to power] Keith Joseph, Geoffrey Howe, Alan Walters and so on – were connected to the broader neo-liberal network, and that neo-liberal activists were so successful at projecting their ideas as dynamic and innovative that even a Prime Minister felt she could bolster her authority by associating herself with them (Jackson 2012: 59-60).

Survivors of this era talk of Thatcher turning to Hayek and Friedman “to justify what she already thought”, or that rather than exerting direct influence they provided a “supporting wind”. Today’s experts explain the function of experts and think-tanks as propelling ideas “within the hearing range of decision makers” (Ledger 2018: 42; Cooper 2012: 25). It was in fact only when she became Prime Minister that her patronage of the Institute of Economic Affairs and others came out into the open, as she began her high-profile crusade for free markets and the shrinking of the welfare state. So much so, says Jackson, that “Margaret Thatcher and her associates acquired much greater confidence in free market economics as democratic statecraft than was ever espoused by neo-liberal theorists” (Jackson 2012: 60).

## THATCHER AS PROSELYTISER OF THE AMERICAN WAY FOR BRITAIN

From the great collection of her speeches, interviews and remarks placed on-line by the Margaret Thatcher Foundation (an American-style organisation which no other British politician has ever invented, except Tony Blair), there emerges clearly her anxiety to impress audiences in the US with the lessons she believed Britain could learn from their nation's history. Every one of those speeches included some form of eulogy for the American way, and her determination to import its examples in order to change Britain. In 1975 she told a New York audience:

In the coming months in Britain, we shall all be thinking particularly of the achievements of the United States in the two hundred years of its existence and of the lessons your country can teach the rest of the world" (Thatcher 1975 [1]; Moore 2013: 250).

As Prime Minister she was given the unique privilege in 1985 of an address to a Joint Session of Congress. She rose to the occasion with overflowing eloquence:

We in Europe have watched with admiration the burgeoning of this mighty American economy. There is a new mood in the United States. A visitor feels it at once. The resurgence of your self-confidence and your national pride is almost tangible. Now the sun is rising in the West (applause).

For many years, our vitality in Britain was blunted by excessive reliance on the State. Our industries were nationalised controlled and subsidised in a way that yours never were. We are having to recover the spirit of enterprise which you never lost. Many of the policies you are following are the policies we are following. You have brought inflation down. So have we. You have declared war on regulations and controls. So have we. Our Civil Service is now smaller than at any time since the War and controls on pay, prices, dividends, foreign exchange, all are gone.

You have encouraged small business – so often the source of tomorrow's jobs. So have we. But above all, we are carrying out the largest programme of denationalisation in our history (applause).

Just a few years ago, in Britain, privatisation was thought to be a pipe dream. Now it is a reality and a popular one... Members of Congress, that is what capitalism is – a system which brings wealth to the many and not just to the few (applause) (Thatcher 1985).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Context and impact described in MOORE 2013: 250. This part of the speech is generally ignored by commentators, including Moore.

Following on from all this came a distinct Thatcherite idea of capitalism, and more specifically of capitalism in Britain. Economics is crucial to understanding the meaning of the whole project, and here we see the American influence at its most potent. Transmitted by Thatcher's great intellectual mentor Keith Joseph, the supreme idea was Professor Milton Friedman's analysis of the relationship between government spending and inflation, known commonly as 'Monetarism' (Jackson 2012: 53-56; Denham and Garnett: 2001: 180; Joseph 1976).<sup>4</sup> At a time of great financial crisis for the British state, with inflation running at 18% per annum in 1980, the value of the pound rising at 12.5%, and 2 million jobs lost in manufacturing in the years 1979-81, 'monetarism' promised that by eliminating any form of official deficit spending – especially by way of loss-making nationalised industries – the supply and demand for money would even out, and inflation would disappear (Brittan 1989: 20-21; Thatcher 1995: 567-569). As Professor Friedman himself told the House of Commons Select Committee on the Treasury in July, 1980:

Inflation over any substantial period is always a monetary phenomenon, arising from a more rapid growth in the quantity of money than in output. Few economic propositions are more firmly grounded in experience – experience extending over thousands of years and the face of the globe.

Emphasising his strong support for the Thatcher government's general monetary strategy, Professor Friedman insisted though that controlling inflation, was not enough to improve Britain's chronic lack of productive competitiveness:

That requires measures on a broader scale to restore and improve incentives, promote productive investment, and give a greater scope for private enterprise and initiative (Friedman 1980; Gilmour 1982; Matthijs 2011: 109-110, 112-113, 121-124).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> On the relationship between Keith Joseph and 'monetarism', going back to 1969, DENHAM and GARNETT 2001: 180. At that stage Joseph was anxious to point out that the UK was *not* like the US, because of its global economy and large public sector. Eventually he was to declare that 'monetarism is not enough', in a speech of 1976 (<https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/110796>, accessed November 18, 2019), meaning that controlling the money supply, and thereby defeating inflation, would be only the beginning of renewing the national economy.

<sup>5</sup> 'Monetarism' was denounced as superstitious dogma even by senior people in Thatcher's own party, eg. Ian Gilmour, GILMOUR 1982. Experience would soon show that even identifying the 'money supply', let alone controlling it by fiscal and interest rate maneuvers was

All the great 1980's-1990's upheavals of privatisation and de-regulation stem from these convictions: the supremacy of the market in all things, the idolisation of the entrepreneur, the deep faith in the benefits of competition and free trade, between firms, nations, individuals, the instinct to reduce tax on the 'wealth-creating' classes, to 'roll back' the presence of the state everywhere possible. But there was a paradox: only the strongest state could carry out the social and political revolution all this implied, that and the deep political passivity of the British people (Bogdanor 1989: 135; Gamble 1994; Galbraith 1980).<sup>6</sup> The obstacles would be overcome, said the Thatcherites, by getting rid of nationalised industries, encouraging people everywhere to buy shares in the new companies, democratising capitalism. Thatcherites would also try to revolutionise government by bringing business methods and business people into it, outsourcing public services to private agencies and exalting the spirit of managerialism and the entrepreneur on every possible occasion, including in the school, university and health systems. A leading sociologist of the time told a visiting American journalist in 1989:

I mean her line is: if you don't get business right: nothing else will be right. And that's a very ungentlemanly thing to say. A lot of your people having tea at the Athenaeum [an élite private club at the heart of London] have gentlemanly values. They don't want to be contaminated by trade. Mrs Thatcher *loves* [sic] trade. That's what she's all about (Critchfield 1990: 202).

This very perceptive comment drove straight to the transformation Thatcher was bringing to her Conservative party: away from the *noblesse oblige* strain of inherited wealth, the professions, the judges, ex-Army personnel, the graduates of Eton and Oxford, and very much towards a political culture where the people, methods and priorities of business – real or assumed – always came first. In reality the trend was already well under way when she had taken her party over in 1975, and the ability of the Tories to mutate, survive and thrive according to the exigencies of power had long been acknowledged by onlookers. But Thatcher pushed her convictions harder and made them more explicit than any of her predecessors (Cook and Ramsden 1978: 34-45; Bagehot 2019; Gamble 2019; Matthijs 2011: 134).<sup>7</sup>

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a very difficult proposition in a complex economy like Britain's, highly dependent on world trade, and hence on exchange rates. By 1985 'monetarism' had been officially abandoned; cf. *Financial Times*, Oct. 19, 1985; MATTHIJS 2011: 109-110, 112-113, 121-124.

<sup>6</sup> Bogdanor wrote: "Mrs Thatcher, far from seeking to limit the power of government, has made use of it to a far greater extent than her predecessors. The ambit of government may be limited, but its scope has become infinite". On the passivity of the British people, comments by Galbraith in the context of a critique of Friedman's Parliamentary presentation.

<sup>7</sup> In reality Thatcher's efforts to move the party in her direction were gradual, becoming

## POLICY TRANSFERS FROM THE US TO BRITAIN UNDER THATCHER

If so much of this language, these attitudes, that ideology sounds familiar to us from what we see and hear of America, that's because they *did* take courage and inspiration from the US. Of course there were plenty of British precedents, especially in the liberal inheritance of the 19<sup>th</sup> c. But, outside the neo-liberal think-tanks, no-one in Britain had ever thought of reviving that legacy for use in Britain's 1970s emergency. It was the American example which showed Thatcher what to do in practical political terms, how to transform her convictions and prejudices into a programme of concrete action. That does not mean she decided consciously for, say, a new law-and-order policy, and ordered the relevant minister to telephone the US. But it is clear that after a while departments began automatically to look in that direction for examples, if they were not confident of their own ideas, rejecting automatically anything coming from Brussels, and wanting to please the leader. The American political scientist David Dolowitz, the leading scholar of this transfer mechanism, has demonstrated that a propensity to borrow from the US gradually developed within Thatcher's administrations, and became in various ways adopted, adapted and institutionalised (Dolowitz 1998: ch. 3).

Dolowitz writes:

During the Thatcher years, the government turned to America for ideas and inspirations in many areas of social policy, particularly those associated with welfare reform. Throughout the 1980s American politicians and academics were discussing the emergence of dependency. The argument was that the growth of a dependency culture significantly undermined the work ethic. The Thatcher government was quick to adopt this rhetoric (*ibid.*: 175).

Ideas borrowed from the US helped transform public attitudes towards the unemployed and the economically inactive, but policies programmes and institutions were also transferred. Dolowitz then lists a series of specific examples, and goes on to show how the practice continued under Thatcher's Tory successor Major, and grew substantially under the following Labour Prime Ministers, Blair and Brown. Other areas included penal policy, such as the electronic monitoring of offenders, or methods for dealing with drug traffickers and drug users, and organised crime (*ibid.*: 68-85).

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more prominent only with the self-confidence she gained after her 1983 and 1987 election victories. They also largely ignored the financial sector, which would eventually come to dominate the British economy, after her 1986 deregulation of the currency and investment markets; (MATTHIJS 2011: 134, MOORE 2013: 216).

Not everything was automatically taken up. Executive mayors were investigated and rejected. The most extreme measures used in some US States for forcing lone parents with babies into work, were not adopted. But there is always the impression of a constant stream of official teams desperate to get to America and embrace whatever they could find. On labour market reform, US think-tanks and individuals, official reports and conferences all offered inspiration (*ibid.*: 76-84).

The historian James Cooper adds: "It was clearly a conscious decision by Thatcher to Americanise British industry, to the disadvantage of the union movement, and transform the legal position to one favouring management and restricting unions, as was the case in America". As an admiring American journalist, Irwin Stelzer, put it, Thatcher's aim was to build "a country with more share-holders than trade union members" (Cooper 2012: 133; Stelzer 2012).

In the substance of policy, certain public sectors, in particular the school and university systems, were reformed again and again in the hope of hooking them up to the motor of economic growth in the way their equivalents were supposed to function in the US (Herzner 2003: 113-117).<sup>8</sup> On schools, Downing Street "did successfully enlist the support of the US Education Secretary William Bennett, who visited Mrs Thatcher in July [1987] to back her educational reform", writes Charles Moore, on the grounds that "American support" had been so helpful in selling 'monetarism' in the early Thatcher era. Unfortunately, "there were not really the same American conservative heavyweights in the field of education as in economics" (Moore 2019: 59).

Without conscious American help, employment policy was explicitly modelled on Reaganite ideology and experience, as Dolowitz has shown in his detailed, operational study of the transfer process (Dolowitz 1998: 26-27, 108). The highly regulated broadcasting duopoly of the BBC and the Independent Television network was attacked frontally with the aim of producing a market-led commercial system, and the "enterprise culture" was imposed throughout the institutional world of the arts. Even inner-city regeneration was promoted using models and connections from the US (Hewison 1995: chs. VII, VIII).

There is little evidence to show what the targets of all this effort thought of their forced Americanization, though British civil servants interviewed by Dolowitz were often quite explicit about what was happening: "We took the United States model [of labour market reform] and in a sense we translated it almost literally... into English" (Dolowitz 1998:

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. articles by P. Scott and J.R.G. Thomlinson in KAVANAGH and SELDON 1989.

143). The political scientist Andrew Gamble believes that the results were visible and negative:

The principles of the new public management, imported mostly from America, were applied in sector after sector and resistance to the new dispensation was steadily overcome, but the cost for the government was the breakdown of trust and support among many of its natural supporters (Gamble 2003: 185).

But this is an unusual judgment. One of the reasons these trends have attracted so little attention from the many commentators on the Thatcher legacy, is perhaps because Thatcher herself was much too clever to say explicitly to the British people: “you must all be like them!”, as a reading of her many speeches soon confirms (Cooke 1989). This form of restraint would be abandoned by Blair and Brown (especially Brown), but in Thatcher’s case, the evidence is clear that across the Atlantic was where her gaze was always directed, and where part of her heart lay: it was her “second home”, she said in her memoirs (Thatcher 1995: 468; Ellwood 2010).

One commentator from the old right-wing establishment was able to map some of the results as soon as 1987, with a compendium of biographies of the 400 top newsmakers of the time, plus an index to 6000 others. The author has been long forgotten, but his judgments were endorsed repeatedly by critics over the Thatcher years (Quart 2003). Richard Compton Miller wrote:

Mrs Thatcher’s Britain is all about money. Money can buy you anything, it can buy you in anywhere nowadays. Old families, old money, doesn’t matter, because the heroes people want to read about have made their own... Money and stardom matter. We have become just like America... It’s about self-made money, like America. Look at her government. There’s never been a Tory government with so few aristocrats and old money (Compton Miller 1987).

#### THE OTHER SIDE OF THE COIN: THE REJECTION OF EUROPE

In her formative years in politics, Thatcher had insisted Britain must be an active protagonist of European integration, telling a 1963 election audience: “I don’t like the idea of Europe without us there, directing and guiding its powers” (Moore 2013: 186). In a remarkable speech to an American university audience of 1975, she launched her own ‘Declaration on Interdependence’, and explained the concept of ‘interdependence’ in detail. In the 1975 referendum on British membership of the EEC, organised by the then Labour government, she voted to remain [Thatcher 1975 (2)].<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> It’s not clear whether Thatcher didn’t know that President Kennedy had launched a

But once in power after 1979, her attitude changed quickly and radically. Her first diplomatic secretary, Sir Bryan Cartledge, described later how: “From the very beginning she was impatient with and contemptuous of the forms and ethos of the European Community and exasperated by its rhetoric”. Over the years, says Cartledge, Thatcher turned every Euro-meeting into a battle, whether right or wrong, so that by the end ‘strident nationalism’ was the order of the day.

The result was enduring resentment of Britain among European functionaries and politicians, no matter what the issue under discussion, and on the other hand the awakening of the “latent xenophobia” present within her party and the British population, especially that part of it which read the popular, right-wing press (Cartledge 2003: 158-159).<sup>10</sup> Ian Gilmour, a former Tory Minister but deeply sceptical of Thatcher and her ‘ism’, wrote in 1998 that “[a]nother important reason for her dislike was the leaders of the larger European nations being her equals”. Nigel Lawson [her Chancellor 1983-1989] observed that she was “mesmerised by power and therefore much preferred the rulers of the United States and the Soviet Union to our European partners” (Gilmour 1998).<sup>11</sup>

In her 1995 memoirs, all talk of ‘inter-dependence’ had long been forgotten, and in its place came a sustained attack on every form of federalism which Thatcher saw in Europe, in particular the Maastricht Treaty of 1992. Here she said explicitly that she would not have signed it. Instead a reinforced form of inter-governmental cooperation should be the order of the day in this view, a vision however which would not come to pass “unless America is persuaded to remain the dominant European power militarily and economically” (Thatcher 1995: ch. XIII, in particular 472, 480).

In her 2002 reflections on world order problems – *Statecraft* – she dedicated two chapters to ‘Europe’, which from the beginning to end were a frontal attack on all the EU stood for, represented, did and promised to do. Its bureaucracy, its mania for hyper-regulation, its lack of democratic accountability, its agriculture and fishing policies, its pathetic inability to express a decent security policy, its ridiculous fantasy of monetary union: there were no redeeming features. In her view, even her own supreme achievement – the Single Market – had been systematically undermined and whittled down by the bureaucrats and their continental sponsors

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similar ‘Declaration’ in July, 1962, or simply chose to ignore the fact. Her view of the 1975 referendum in THATCHER 1995: 330-335.

<sup>10</sup> On the role of the conservative press in supporting Thatcher, MATTHIJS 2011: 112-113, 117, 120, 152.

<sup>11</sup> Lawson quoted by Gilmour.

(Thatcher 2017).<sup>12</sup> The federalist impulse and the prospect of an 'ever-closer union' were intolerable, and could never be reconciled with Britain's proud ideas of its own sovereignty, its unmistakable exceptionalism. The EU "was perhaps the greatest folly of the modern era". A future Conservative government should apply to join NAFTA – turning it into a North Atlantic Free Trade Area – and if necessary leave the EU altogether. The *Statecraft* chapters on Europe were published, unaltered, as a separate text in 2017 (Thatcher 2017: 97-102).<sup>13</sup>

#### THE OUTCOMES, SHORT AND LONG-TERM

The actual results of all Thatcher's efforts in top-down Americanization remained ambiguous as long as she was still in power. In 1989, the country's leading political scientist, Ivor Crewe, felt moved to say:

Quite simply, there has been no Thatcherite transformation of attitudes or behaviour among the British public. If anything, the British have edged further away from Thatcherite positions as the decade has progressed. The Thatcher governments have undoubtedly transformed the British political economy, overturned the political agenda, and permanently altered the social structure. But this has been done without a cultural counter-revolution in the thinking of ordinary people.

On the basis of extensive opinion polling, Crewe concluded that:

After nine years of Thatcherism the public remained wedded to the collectivist, welfare ethic of social democracy (Crewe 1989: 241, 243).

Huge majorities deplored her most radical policies, such as the privatisation of utilities. The idea of privatised water and prisons seemed "positively barmy" to a commentator in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1987. She did them anyway (Campbell 1987).<sup>14</sup> In 1988 Kenneth Harris, the distinguished journalist from the weekly *Observer* newspaper, commented that Thatcherite economics were clearly adding to unemployment and poverty, and widening the gaps between rich and poor, north and south: "As in America, neo-liberalism risks creating a permanent underclass which are excluded from enjoying the freedoms that the rest of society can afford" (Harris 1988: 217-218).

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<sup>12</sup> The book is dedicated to Reagan.

<sup>13</sup> Complaint over bureaucratic and political subversion of Single Market at 62-66.

<sup>14</sup> Water privatisation was started after Thatcher won the 1987 general election; prison privatisation started after Thatcher, in the 1990s.

But Thatcher's free-market ideology was embraced by the financial system with enthusiasm, hence the 'Big Bang' moment of de-regulation in London's financial markets in 1986. It was that event which "ushered in the Americanisation of the City" a banker remembered ruefully in September 2008. In the 2019 BBC TV series on Thatcher, a Treasury Minister of her era admitted, "We were unleashing forces in capitalism we didn't know about" (Augar 2008).<sup>15</sup>

So the immediate impact of all the policies and all the years of reforming zeal was decidedly mixed. Her successor John Major proclaimed that his own election victory in 1992 showed that socialism was indeed dead in Britain, and guaranteed that "our [Thatcherite] reforms over the previous thirteen years were made permanent" (Matthijs 2011: 140). Most of the academic observers were not convinced. Arthur Marwick, a leading social historian of the time, commented on social attitude surveys at the end of her reign which confirmed the persistence of "uniquely British characteristics, few of them conforming to Thatcherite ideas". In particular attitudes to wealth creation, job security and social services all continued little changed from previous eras of the welfare state. It was Marwick's conviction that "despite a Government openly admiring of American ways of doing things, and the spread in Britain, as never before, of a universalized American style and gimmickry, the Britishness of British life was still abundantly in evidence" (Marwick 1996: 371-372). In the intense debate which followed upon her fall in 1990 on the meaning of the Thatcher years for the nation's past, present and future, America and Americanization were barely mentioned, nor have they been since (from a vast selection, Evans 2013, Cannadine 2017).

Two American sources of the time reflect the deep ambiguity of her legacy, as it originally appeared and would continue to do so. The US Ambassador of the 1991-1994 years, Raymond Seitz, wrote in his memoirs that whatever doubts he might have about the 'Special Relationship', the transformation compared with the England he had first known in the 1970's was, he said, "little short of miraculous". The "harrowing sense of British free-fall (had) finally come to an end". The economic agenda of the nation had been re-written and the old stereotypes broken up. The place was "more flexible, adaptable, educated and competitive" (Seitz 1998: 221-224).

Much more sceptical was the judgment offered by Richard Critchfield, a leading US journalist who had been commissioned by the then editor of *The Economist* to provide a grand fresco of Britain in 1990, and was supplied

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<sup>15</sup> Ex-Treasury Minister David Howell interviewed in BBC TV, 'Thatcher – A Very British Revolution', episode 2, May 27, 2019.

with introductions to the leading figures of the time in all the sectors that counted. His remarkably vivid and incisive portrait ends on a note of radical doubt:

“I have changed everything”, Mrs Thatcher said soon after being elected leader of the Conservative Party in 1975. She had not. And she has not... Mrs. Thatcher’s determination is “praiseworthy”, [sic] but her record of achievement is “patchy” [sic]. Her inability to break the public school Oxbridge establishment’s hold on Britain is to me the fundamental failure... The way she cut taxes, cut union power and deregulated Britain’s economy look very good for its short-term future. Just as with Britain’s shrinking industrial base, Mrs. Thatcher’s antipathy toward European unity and her failure to invest more in schools, science and industry are very worrying in the long run (Critchfield 1990: 435).

Forty years on from her arrival in Downing Street, the verdicts are clearer, especially as it is abundantly obvious that Blair, Brown and Cameron *were* converted to her outlook on all those objectives and methods that Mrs Thatcher cared about, preached them if possible with even greater virulence, and never failed until very late to exalt the American version of them (Matthijs 2011: 140; Ellwood 2010). The result has been that while the public repeatedly demonstrated its faith in public provision of all sorts of social services, and the taxes to pay for them, the great impulses from above that she set in motion – to bring market forces to play in welfare, schools, health services, policing and so on – tended to get stronger among political leaders rather than weaker. In her years in power the Prime Minister felt obliged to resist “pressure from the right for imitation of American models of health care” (Webster 1989: 182), and limited herself to pleas for people to take more responsibility for choosing their health and educational services, exhortations which largely fell on deaf ears (Addison 2010: 298).<sup>16</sup> But by the time of Cameron in 2010, privatization had become the norm in this sphere too. In 2019 a writer in the *London Review of Books* was able to map out what he called “the Americanisation of the National Health Service... in full swing” (Furse 2019).

Thatcher herself left office convinced her revolution was unfinished, and there were plenty of observers to declare that hers was a passing phase, product of a time of economic emergency. As late as 2005, one of her closest collaborators in the early years, Alfred Sherman, wrote that the Conservative Party was “still suffering from a crisis of identity, a post-Thatch-

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<sup>16</sup> Addison explains that because of near-universal popular attachment to all the basics of postwar collectivism, “The Thatcher revolution stopped short at the ramparts of the welfare state and never stormed the citadel”.

erite *anomie*”, outshone by the pseudo-Thatcherite Tony Blair (Sherman 2005: 30-31). Earlier analysts turned out to be more prescient. Most striking among them was the British sociologist Stuart Hall. Applying a Gramsci-based concept of hegemony, with its emphasis on language, narrative, and ideas, Hall predicted in 1988 that the impact of the ‘Iron Lady’ would be enduring:

[Thatcherism] set out to and has effectively become a populist political force, enlisting popular consent among significant sections of the dominated classes, successfully presenting itself as a force on the side of the people and moving into a commanding, or leading, position in society through a combination of the imposition of social discipline from above... and of populist mobilization from below... [a form of] “authoritarian populism”... Many of the trends and tendencies in postwar British society, which we came to assume were part and parcel of the very conditions of survival of British capitalism... are in the process of being either dismantled or reworked into new combinations (Hall 1988: 38-41, 47, 59).

But not even Hall mentioned the function of American models in this reworking process.

#### CONCLUSION: THE THATCHER LEGACY AND BREXIT

A question worth asking is why, if the Thatcher vision and practice was so successful and had become so deeply rooted as claimed long afterwards, the 1990’s-2000’s debate on national identity was so intense and tormented? From the early 1990s onwards, deep anxiety began to emerge over everything to do with ‘Europe’, but also around immigration and multiculturalism, the unity of the kingdom, the monarchy, the structure and function of the armed forces, the welfare state, the mass media, the education system. The debates invested the balance of the economy: the hegemony of financial services and the marginalisation of manufacturing industry, the reliance on a bloated universe of private credit and ever-increasing house prices, inequality and the resentments of the winners and the losers in the trends of the previous 20 years.

In his *Patriots. National Identity in Britain, 1940-2000*, the historian Richard Weight demonstrated how the 1990’s witnessed the most intense inquiry into the nature of Britishness since the Suez drama of 1956. In 1999 the political scientist Joel Krieger explained that:

the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion (are) fluid and vexed, the representations of nation hotly contested, the attachments at once robust and uncertain... (Weight 2002: 665; Krieger 1999: 137).

By looking at all this through the lens of 'identity', such issues became in a sense domesticated. Sovereignty and hence a sense of control were reasserted, however illusory: that is what the 'Leave' side in the Brexit referendum campaign openly placed at the heart of its appeal: 'take *back* control'. In this way the nation-state nexus would be re-vitalised, and 'globalisation' contained. "Economics is global, politics is local", Martin Wolf of the *Financial Times*, pronounced, in one of his reflections on the meaning of the great financial drama of 2007-2009, unwittingly reviving old debates from the 1920s and 1930s when the full consequences of 'inter-dependence' were first discovered (Wolf 2009). But how to manage the balance between these two dynamics? With what political, intellectual and moral assets? With what explanations of how the British got to where they were, and where they might look for a new way forward?

From Thatcher era onwards, one of the resources the British governing class has always felt able to count on in the emergency has been 'America'. Not American policy or money of course, not even that 'Special Relationship' which London clings on to so desperately and forlornly (Ambassador Seitz, who never used the phrase, thought of the concept, very presciently, as "a bromide should Europe prove ultimately indigestible" (Seitz 1998: 325-327). Thatcher invented an inspirational version of the United States, a source of models, examples, energies, ideas, stimuli, standards, an invoked America whose soft power influence and prestige would never fade. It became in this way a form of virtual political capital that the Thatchers, Blairs, Browns and Cameron felt they could draw on to compensate them for all their frustrations in Europe, their humiliations in the wider world and the intractability of their problems at home (Gamble 2003: 145).

Seen from this perspective, 'Brexit' represented a confluence of two streams of national self-definition. On the one hand was the legacy of the Thatcherite denunciation of the entire European project, culminating in the 'Iron Lady's' 2002 demand that the UK withdraw entirely from the European Union. On the other, the identity dilemmas of the post-Thatcher era on the meaning of *Being British* (D'Ancona 2009; Ellwood 2010). The context was the exhaustion of the version of neo-liberalism developed by Thatcher and Reagan – "with their new fusion of disruptive capitalism and social traditionalism" (Beckett 2019; Stiglitz 2019) – following the great financial crisis of 2007-2009. The unmentioned presence in all this has always been some form of 'America', particularly what most other societies call 'Americanization'. In Gordon Brown's essay collection *Being British*, the Minister of State for Constitutional Renewal [sic] noted that "the imagined community once populated with monarchs and the British Grenadiers now shares space with Tom Cruise and Starbucks and dreams of self-fulfillment". In the very next sentence his discussion moved on to the impor-

tance of a strong sense of national identity. Not to reflect on America's place in it following the logic of his own suggestion, but to ask where Islam might fit in... (Wills 2009: 190).

In his 1968 treatment of *Industry and Empire*, Eric Hobsbawm wrote that Britain had

been more unwilling [than others] to try new paths for its economy, *because no new paths seem to lead to half so inviting a prospect as the old ones*. These may be unpassable, but other roads do not appear very passable either (Hobsbawm 1968: 7).

After 1968, the people who Mrs Thatcher came to despise tried the path of 'Europe'. With her help, others – especially the financiers of the City of London, and 'New Labour' – embraced globalization and neo-liberalism. In her years in power Mrs Thatcher personally imposed a road suggested in large part by her vision of 'America'. It was the disappointments and failures of any of these paths to open a prospect equal to the glories of the past that would eventually produce the agony of Brexit.

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