

THATCHERISM AND WOMEN: AFTER SEVEN YEARS

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In 1979 the Conservative Party won the British general election led by a woman—paradoxically, after ten years of **leftwing** feminist activism, it was the Tories that gave the British their first woman Prime Minister. And the most paradoxical aspect of all has been that Margaret Thatcher, the 'exceptional woman' *par excellence*, has done nothing to advance the cause of women, indeed during her period of office the quality of life for the majority of women in this country has deteriorated. This has been as a direct result of the tremendous class attack launched by the Conservative government against working people, both women and men.

The initial reaction of the British left, and this included many feminists, was on the one hand disbelief that the British people *could* have voted such a reactionary government into power, and on the other the rapid construction of an explanation for this event in terms of an ideology of 'Thatcherism'.¹ The development of this concept rested on a conviction that disillusionment with socialism and progress had willed the whole populace to the Right. Bob Jessop² and others have recently mounted an extensive and measured critique of the 'Thatcherism' thesis, particularly as it has been developed in the work of Stuart Hall and in a series of articles published in *Marxism Today*. Jessop and his co-authors argue, for example, that Stuart Hall's notion of 'authoritarian populism', upon which 'Thatcherism' is based, is ambiguous and incoherent. They suggest that the Left has too readily accepted the Right's own assessment of itself and its decisive ideological break with the past. It would be more accurate to see 'Thatcherism' 'as an alliance of disparate forces around a self-contradictory programme'. They argue that the belief that 'Thatcherism' and 'authoritarian populism' represent a break with thirty-five years of consensus government following the 'post-war settlement' of 1945 is historically inaccurate. The 'post-war settlement' is an ideological construct, and was never the coherent entity it is now portrayed as having been. Although Paul Addison³ has demonstrated that in some respects the expansion of the welfare state and the establishment of Keynesian welfare capitalism after 1945 represented a continuity with pre-war policies already established by Conservative administrations of the 1930s, there was still enormous resistance from the Right to the implementation

of nationalisation programmes and public welfare provision. Liberals such as William Beveridge, and 'one nation' Tories such as Harold Macmillan were ardent Keynesians, but they were not typical. Many Conservatives shared Winston Churchill's suspicion of the Beveridge Plan, and although a thorough overhaul of the health services would have been necessary after the end of World War Two whichever party had won the election, under the Conservatives it would have taken a different and less radical form. It is the 'Thatcherites' themselves who have resuscitated the myth fostered by the Conservatives in the post-war period that Labour represented 'creeping socialism' and totalitarian statism—during the 1945 election campaign Churchill even alleged that a Labour victory would mean a Gestapo in Britain. Furthermore, 'the post-war consensus around the Keynesian welfare state was limited by the post-war consensus on Atlanticist foreign policy and City financial policy and was conducted not under the *hegemony* of the Labour Party and/or the working class, nor even of the industrial bourgeoisie, but under the *dominance* of finance capital. This must qualify any argument that there has been a radical break between a social democratic era and the present Thatcherite *ascendancy*'.⁴ The 'Thatcherism' thesis also neglects the extent to which it was not Mrs Thatcher's government that initiated a policy of monetarism and that abandoned the commitment to full employment; rather it was the Labour government of the second half of the 1970s under James Callaghan and Denis Healey.

Because of what Bob Jessop and his fellow writers describe as 'ideologism', the proponents of the 'Thatcherism' thesis are anxious to demonstrate that it is an ideology directed very specifically at women and other 'new social forces'. Explanations in which primary importance is given to issues of class and economy are rejected by them as 'class reductionist' and 'economistic' and it has therefore been important to them to be able to argue that part of the coherence of 'Thatcherism' rests on its creation of a seamless repressive ideology that places women firmly in the home.

Martin Jacques, for example, includes within 'Thatcherism' not only the assault on 'scroungers' and the frontal attack on the trades union movement, but also the Festival of Light, the activities of Mrs Mary Whitehouse and the anti-abortion lobby. Yet the Festival of Light *failed* in the early 1970s to get a British 'Moral Majority' off the ground; opinion polls (for what they're worth) demonstrate that while there does seem to be considerable popular hostility to people on welfare benefits, and considerable dislike and distrust of the trades unions, it is not true that a coherent 'authoritarian populism' operates in a fashion similar to the Moral Majority in the United States. The rather old-fashioned Reichian notion, for example as developed by David Edgar,⁵ that economic repression is directly associated with sexual repression and moral conservatism is simply not borne out by the facts. So, if the 'Thatcherism' thesis is vulner-

able in general, it is *particularly* weak in relation to women, as even a superficial comparison between the abortion struggle in Britain and the USA shows.

The power of religious fundamentalism in North America has no real counterpart in this country (more individuals, proportionately, attend church regularly in the Soviet Union than in Britain!). On the other hand the strong American emphasis on individual civil rights meant that abortion reform in the United States in the 1970s was more thorough-going than anything in this country. In the USA women's right to abortion came about as the result of a court ruling which established that restriction on abortion in the first months of pregnancy was an *unconstitutional* infringement on a woman's privacy; the counter argument mounted with increasing success against this has been the rather strange one of the 'rights' of the foetus. At the same time, the rise of religious fundamentalism has meant that the anti-abortion movement has real popular support there (there are even 'pro-life'—i.e. anti-abortion—feminists), and the fundamentalist attack has been of unparalleled ferocity, including arson and bomb attacks on abortion clinics and advice agencies. In Britain, by contrast, the availability of abortion has never been established as a right, and abortion remains a crime unless two members of the medical profession deem that the danger to the woman's health would be greater were she to continue the pregnancy than if it were to be terminated, so that although this wording can be liberally interpreted to include 'social' reasons for abortion, abortion has never been decriminalised; it is in no sense a right. Paradoxically, in this country there *is* widespread popular support for liberal abortion laws, and this tended to increase during the years of the struggle to re-impose draconian restrictions—the public debate inadvertently generated by the anti-abortion lobby damaged their own cause. On other 'moral' issues such as sexual experience outside marriage, divorce and even homosexuality, opinion polls tend to show increasing, if limited, tolerance. And in general there is little evidence in Britain of a general moral backlash against the so-called 'permissive society' of the 1960s, although Tories such as Norman Tebbit and Mrs Thatcher herself, not to mention Sir Keith Joseph, do tend to locate the origins of many of our present problems in the supposedly permissive sixties.

There are a number of reasons for this important difference between Britain and the United States; I lack the space to develop them fully here. One must be the comparative lack in the US of a strong labour movement with a progressive wing, for the support of the trades union movement in 1979 was crucial in blocking anti-abortion legislation here. Another is the individualism of American culture, which renders attractive the discourses both on individual rights and on personal salvation. Thirdly, perhaps the very success of the women's movement in the US by comparison with Britain, where it has remained a more marginal phenomenon and is often

associated with 'leftwing extremism', may have rendered the American movement more vulnerable to a backlash.

After 1979 however, British feminists tended to assume almost automatically that the plan of the Conservative government would be 'back to the home' for women. Yet soon even feminists sympathetic to the general 'Thatcherism' thesis had to admit that it was more complicated than that. For example, the only two articles on women included in *The Politics of Thatcherism*, key text of the 'Thatcherism' thesis, largely dissent from it. Jean Gardiner points out that at least in the first years of Mrs Thatcher's administration, 'men's jobs have continued to disappear more rapidly than women's in the economy as a whole', and she concludes that not only is it 'difficult to estimate the overall impact of unemployment on women', but that 'the Tories' position on women is not [as] explicit or united as their approach on some other issues, for example trade unions. . . A commitment to women's equal rights can coexist with moral beliefs about the family which give rise to policies that go against women's interests. The Tory government is neither explicit about its attacks on women nor even probably aware that its policies have this effect'.⁶

Jean Gardiner is aware, moreover, that the post-war settlement was always problematic for women in a way that has been little remarked by the (mostly male) participants in this debate. Important policy documents of the period—the Beveridge Report (1942), the Royal Commission on Equal Pay (1946) and the Royal Commission on Population (1949)—all demonstrated an anxiety that were married women to enter the workforce on equal terms with men this would constitute a threat to the stability of family life. At the time, the threat to the birthrate was seen as particularly sinister; to restrict women's right to equal access to paid work was seen quite cynically as the only way to ensure that women carried on with their traditional duties in the home. In the words of Roy Harrod, noted economist, in his evidence to the Royal Commission on Equal Pay, 'the situation [of unequal pay] has proved tolerable and stable because it has been found. . . to secure that motherhood as a vocation is not too unattractive compared with work in the professions, industry or trade.' This is an astonishingly frank admission of a reality of economic coercion within and surrounding marriage which is a far cry from the official ideology of romantic love and equal partnership so popular at the time (and today).

Even many feminists at that time, for example Vera Brittain, believed that, women's main demands for equality having been secured, they should now concentrate more on the *differences* between men and women than on equality of rights. For example (and this was a popular theme in the immediate post-war period) she argued that the education of girls should not just ape that of men, but rather they should now be specifically and directly prepared for their domestic and childrearing responsibilities,

which were to be regarded as their special role in life.⁸ At this time there appears to have been little demand from feminists for the erosion of the sexual division of labour, although an embattled minority of feminists did criticise the Beveridge Report for the way in which it reinforced the financial dependence of the wife upon her husband.⁹

The austerity years of the Attlee governments appear to have been dreary ones for women. True, the welfare state had extended some major benefits to them, perhaps particularly in the area of health; but to offset this, the reality of many women's lives at this time was of queues, shortages and the struggle to combine domestic responsibilities with some form of paid work, together with a general lack of glamour and excitement. (Indeed, the whole cultural atmosphere of those years was one steeped in gloomy conservatism and elitism, and the Labour government did little to offset this, for its attitude towards the arts was paternalistic and reformist. . . drawing support from adult education and self improvement [Tawney], municipal labourism and the doctrine of the public corporation [Morrison]. . . The arts were seen as an essential part of the expanded welfare state,' but there was little radical critique of content.)

So the post-war settlement envisaged a very traditional role for women. For them there *was* to be a return to the 1930s, albeit ~~on~~ rather more favourable terms. There was no critique of women's traditional role; on the contrary, this was to be reinforced and strengthened by welfarism. Nor was it the consensus governments of the 1950s and 1960s that undermined women's traditional role; it was the development of a part-time labour market for women, the expansion of job and educational opportunities for at least some young women, co-existing with still very limited career prospects. The rhetoric of 'choice' and the reality of restriction, the changing moral climate and the persistence of legal restrictions all combined in the end, to create the preconditions for the women's liberation movement, as Jean Gardiner correctly points out.

Yet many feminists did appear to believe, at least during the first years of Mrs Thatcher's Conservative governments, that 'Thatcherism' meant back to the home for women, and to give credence to this belief there was the general emphasis of the Tory party on 'family values' and the importance and centrality of family life. Even at this time, however, Jean Coussins and Anna Coote were able to demonstrate that although it was Patrick Jenkin, later to be social services minister, who 'set the ball rolling for the conservatives in 1977', the then Labour government was quick to respond and to attempt to outdo the Conservatives in their echoing of support for the traditional family. ' "Our aim is straightforward," ' wrote James Callaghan, also in 1977, ' "it is to strengthen the stability and quality of family life in Britain." ' He was just as concerned as Patrick Jenkin to keep women in their place, and in his May 1978 address to the National Conference of Labour Women, while 'he did not go so far as to say that

women should be positively discouraged from working outside the home. . . nevertheless Mr Callaghan perceived the absence of women from the home as a danger to the conventional social fabric, referring to "the growth of vandalism and hooliganism" and the consequent need to preserve "the beneficial influence of the family as a whole". Labour's prescription was to adapt women's employment to enable them to perform their work in the home more efficiently: "We have got to pay much more attention than we have done in the past as to how industry organises women's role at work, so that her influence as the centre of the family, and the woman usually is the centre of the family. . . is not weakened".¹¹

James Callaghan's traditionalism was predictable, given his alignment with the rightwing of the trades union movement. According to one commentator, the 1974 Labour administration, in which he was Chancellor and then Prime Minister, was 'reluctant to increase family allowances and implement its child benefit scheme because they were deemed unpopular in public opinion and because it was felt there would be a male backlash about redistributing money from husbands to **wives**'.¹² This reflects what has been the 'traditional ambivalence' of the trades unions towards family allowances and child benefit—the fear (which is not without some foundation) that such benefits make possible wage cuts and/or incomes policies.

The obsession, therefore, of the 'soft' left with an ideology of 'Thatcherism' is misplaced, and is unsupported by empirical evidence, *particularly in relation to women*. On the contrary, *both* the major parties clung to an ideology of familism, presumably partly because it was held to be reassuring in a time of crisis, and because it articulates a number of different and sometimes disparate hopes and fears: of crime, and a breakdown in law and order; of sexual unruliness and deviance; and, most important but least explicit, men's determination to hang on to the privileges of their gender. On the other hand familialist ideologies do at the same time speak to some of the aspirations of women, committed as the majority of them are to making a success of their 'job' as wives and mothers, and committed as they also are to their identity as 'feminine' women, an identity largely realised through these caring roles.¹³

There was *no* explicit Tory policy to return women to their homes. In this respect it is instructive to read one of the few speeches that Mrs Thatcher herself has made on the subject of women's place. When in July 1982 she gave the first Dame Margery Corbett-Ashby Memorial Lecture, she emphasised the importance of the contribution women make to public life in a way that echoes some of the early twentieth century feminists:

What are these special talents and experiences which women have to bring to public life—are they any different in kind from those of men? Yes—because women bear the children and create and run the home. It is noticeable that many of the suffragettes were very womanly. Like Dame Margery they had the

inestimable privilege of being wives and mothers and they pursued their public work against the background of full and happy domestic lives.

While she goes on to attack the permissive society, which, she argues, has not benefited women, and while she reasserts the importance of family life, women need remain at home only while their children are small:

It is of course true that women of our generation are often still comparatively young by the time our children are grown up and therefore we have an opportunity further to develop our own talents, an opportunity which in Dame Margery's day was rarely available. For many that experience can enhance their lives and enlarge their interests.¹⁴

Thus, paradoxically, the philosophy she expresses is *precisely* the philosophy that was developed in the 'permissive sixties' as the 'answer' to the dissatisfaction of women (mostly middle class) who at the time felt they were undervalued and prevented from participating in public life. The solution then being put forward by liberal reformers was that of 'women's two roles'—women were both home-makers *and* had a role to play as paid workers once their children were older, policy researchers argued.¹⁵

So, Mrs Thatcher concludes not that women should go back to the home, but that 'the battle for women's rights has been largely won. The days when they were demanded and discussed in strident tones should be gone forever'—again, the view that dominated the social democratic sociological writings of the 1950s and early 1960s in Britain. This view was an attempt, largely successful for some years, to create an ideology that smoothed out the potential or actual conflicts in women's lives, and to veil this conflict, arising from subordination, with an impression of *harmony* between women's roles at work and in the home. Mrs Thatcher's Dame Corbett-Ashby Memorial Lecture therefore articulates one of the themes of the present government that is necessarily downplayed in the 'Thatcherism' thesis: the theme of the Conservative party under Mrs Thatcher as the *modern* party, the party that welcomes and harnesses change and is committed to an attack on the 'old-fashioned' dogmas of trades unions and an assortment of blinkered ideologues—Fabians, Marxists, feminists and the like—whose time is past and who have got fatally out of step with the world we live in. The most significant Tory measures, such as wholesale privatisation and attacks on trades unions, can then be presented as progressive in that they undermine 'bastions of privilege' and 'free the people'. Indeed, this obsession with the 'modern' and the 'up-to-date' brings the 'New Right' quite close to the proponents of the 'Thatcherism' thesis. They too are anxious to be new and modern, and they like Mrs Thatcher castigate the trades unions for their old

fashioned beliefs and outmoded privileges.

Employment

One particular obsession of those who have developed the 'Thatcherism' thesis has been to insist on a radical division between class interests on the one hand and the interests of 'new forces' such as the peace movement, women and blacks on the other. Women thus tend to be seen as somehow outside class interests altogether. This represents a rather garbled appropriation of the 'radical feminism' of the 1970s. This always tried not simply to prioritise the interests of women (as all feminists must do) but to mount a theoretical analysis to support their belief that the male/female contradiction was the primary one—that it was more fundamental and historically more durable and persistent than either class or race divisions. This was related to the political attempt (which they shared with almost all feminists) to create and justify an autonomous women's movement.¹⁶

However, the attempt by radical feminists to create a unitary analysis of women's oppression faltered because it gave insufficient attention to the divisions as experienced between and among women on grounds of class, race and sexual orientation. The suggestion therefore, by Eric Hobsbawm for example,¹⁷ that the response to 'Thatcherism' must be one that unites 'all women' again fails to take account of issues that divide women and too readily assumes that in Thatcher's Britain all women have been condemned to equal misery. But this is not the case, as we see when we look at employment.

As Angela Weir and I argued in a previous article the employment (or unemployment) policies pursued by the Conservative government for the past seven years have not affected all women uniformly, but have actually widened the gap between better off women and those at the bottom of the employment hierarchy, and this is in large part due to the loss of women's jobs in the manufacturing sector:

The decline in manufacturing has meant that there are fewer jobs for the poorest women, and the increasing size of the service sector has not offset this. It is also in manufacturing that relative pay has declined most rapidly. For example, women sewing machinists earned ninety eight per cent of the average wage for full-time women workers in 1968; now they receive only seventy six per cent.'

The work of Vanessa Fry and Nick Morris also draws attention to the widening gap between the poorest and the best-off women:

In 1968 a family in the richest ten per cent was around three times as well off as a family in the poorest ten per cent, by 1981 they were five times as well off.

Fry and Morris argue that one important factor explaining this is that

'Women's earnings do not have the equalising effect they once did' and that this is because 'the economy has been better at creating jobs for well-educated women than jobs for women at the bottom end of society. The largest increase in participation in the workforce has been among. . . better off [women]. In 1968, women married to managers and professional men were only four-fifths as likely to work as the wives of men in manual jobs. Now, if anything, they are more likely to have a job.'¹⁹

This trend is confirmed by Jean Martin and Ceridwen Roberts in their 1984 employment survey. They report that:

some groups of women are advantaged compared with others in respect of pay and a number of job related benefits and opportunities. Women working full time in non-manual jobs where men as well as women do the same kind of work tend to be better paid and to have better conditions of employment and opportunities than the majority of women workers.²⁰

Therefore, they argue, these groups of women enjoying much better terms and conditions of employment than the majority of women in paid work, can be seen as belonging to the 'primary sector' of the labour market, that is the sector where unionisation, better pay, opportunities for training and advancement, and fringe benefits are found. For this reason, they conclude, although their findings 'provide some empirical support for the view that the labour market is segmented along dual lines for women with the majority of women workers segregated in jobs with secondary characteristics. . . they do not support the idea that all women workers are secondary workers. Women workers, as we have shown, are more heterogeneous in their pay and 'job conditions than this simple dichotomy of the labour market implies'.²¹

Rather than making a specific attack on women as a homogeneous group, then, the present government has mounted a direct class attack in order to raise productivity and increase profits and with the further aim of weakening and even destroying the trades union movement, which is seen as interfering with the freedom of the market. In a study of the cleaning industry—one of the most badly paid and most exploitative, and one that employs predominantly women—Angela Coyle has pointed out that the aim of current government policies is to "'free" or "deregulate" the employer/employee relationship. Sub-contract work plus abolition of all legislation which controls and protects minimum pay and employment conditions have been key strategies in the Thatcher government's policy of enabling "market forces" to regulate wage levels and of enabling the lowest wage threshold to be found.'²²

While, however, a particular industrial strategy is being used by the present British government, this coincides with or capitalises on longer term trends which are certainly not confined to this country. In all Western capitalist countries (Hilda Scott argues in all industrialised countries,

including the socialist countries) a number of changes are occurring which combine to cause what is known in the United States as the pauperisation of women, or the feminisation of poverty. The decline of the manufacturing sector, the increase of part-time work in the service sector, and changes in technology and in consumption patterns (for example the trend towards fast take-out food outlets) have combined with changing family structure and particularly with the rise in divorce rates to create a situation in which more and more women become wage workers, yet as an increasingly vulnerable part of the workforce. In the United States, for example, the number of one-parent families nearly doubled between 1970 and 1981, whilst in Britain their total grew by two thirds.

Joan Smith, in a discussion of this phenomenon in the United States, emphasises the importance of part-time work in the service sector in creating this new poverty of women (although, according to her, men are increasingly being forced to undertake part-time work as well). Operations such as supermarket retailing and fast food chains are both undercapitalised and labour intensive, and are also in a highly competitive market and this leads to the increased exploitation of the workforce:

The irony is that the increase in such employment practices signals a vastly increased dependence on a wage labour force that, paradoxically, must be treated in all other respects as though it was entirely dispensable. In short the contemporary economy has moved to centre stage a labour force that must be continually endowed with marginal characteristics.²³

And she suggests that the female labour force is just such a force because of the still prevalent belief that women form a secondary labour force primarily dependent on a husband's wage for survival.

While conditions in Britain cannot necessarily be assimilated to or predicted on the basis of a study of the USA, the tendency noted by Joan Smith does appear to operate in Britain and in many other countries as well. The deregulation of women's work and their pauperisation in Britain today cannot therefore be read off as an effect of 'Thatcherism', and to assume that it can is to fall into the parochialism of which the 'Thatcherism' proponents have all too often been guilty.

Veronica Beechey²⁴ has pointed out that in fact there are national differences in rates of part-time versus full-time work but that this is within the context of an overall movement towards part-time employment in capitalist countries. Denmark and Sweden, like the USA, also have high rates of part-time working, but this is less strongly associated with women's employment than is the case in Britain. On the other hand the employment rate for women is higher in Britain than in any other European country, according to Angela Coyle.²⁵ Veronica Beechey suggests that women's employment is growing while that of men declines:

[Women's employment] has grown fairly steadily from seven million in 1951 to 8.6 million in 1966, and 9.2 million in 1981. By contrast, the numbers of men in the labour force increased from 13.5 million in 1951 to a peak of 14.7 million in 1966 and then declined to 12.9 million in 1981. This decline looks set to continue during the 1980s, and it is estimated that by 1990 there will be 11.2 million men in the labour force, three and a half million fewer than in 1966. If current trends continue, women will comprise nearly half the labour force in the 1990s, and in some areas, like Wales, they may comprise over half well before the end of the decade.²⁴

Jean Martin and Ceridwen Roberts²⁷ suggest that in fact the number of women who do some paid work outside the home is actually close to seventy-one per cent if the numbers of students and 'economically inactive' women who do some very part-time work, for example as bar maids or who do child minding or some other form of homework, are taken into account.

In fact, by 1990 it is also predicted that one in four jobs will be part-time, and that the terms and conditions of work are likely to be increasingly unfavourable. Part-time workers are, of course, the most vulnerable section of the workforce. Less likely to be unionised than full-time workers, they tend to be concentrated in a few, low-paid sectors of the work force, and tend to move rapidly in and out of work according to the vagaries of short term demand (and to some extent according to the exigencies of their own domestic situation). They are less likely than men to register as unemployed, and therefore remain to some extent a hidden and underestimated section of the workforce. Angela Coyle stresses the vulnerability of these workers when she points out that 'what is happening is that the most vulnerable sections of the workforce are at the *forefront* of a general dismantling of the regulation and control of employment. Women are being used to pave the way for a significant deterioration in terms and conditions of *employment*.'²⁸

Therefore, measures such as the withdrawal of maternity and job rights from women in firms employing fewer than ten workers in the 1980 Employment Act are less intended as a deterrent to women working than as a way of lessening the cost of their employment to the employer, just as the fact that women may now be required to prove that they have adequate child care before they are allowed to sign on is less a demonstration of concern for children whose mothers wish to work than a short term expedient to keep down unemployment numbers. But this is not to deny that the ideology of women's traditional place is drawn in opportunistically to render such measures more acceptable.

Privatisation and pauperisation have certainly accelerated and intensified during the past seven years as a result of the current government's general economic strategy and policies pursued in order to create a low wage economy in Britain. These policies have nevertheless undergone a

distortion such that they have borne particularly harshly on women, although less for ideological than for directly economic reasons. Of course, to be a victim of an economic policy rather than of an ideology hardly alters the circumstances of the victims; but it does alter our understanding of women's situation, and this in turn has consequences for the strategies needed to reverse the situation. Ideology is used expediently, but in fact low-waged unprotected women workers are essential to the Thatcher economy. Indeed the ideology shifts in order to accommodate this, and in recent months the government has tended less to harp on women's role in the family (the device used to cover welfare cuts) and rather to defend part-time work as a solution for women (again, the liberal argument of the 1960s); it is, the government suggests, what the women of Britain want, since it fits in with their domestic responsibilities. So the rhetoric of choice and freedom can be used to mask the reality of super-exploitation and falling real incomes. As the job market changes, some women may be thrown out of work as the labour intensive jobs in industries such as textiles and clothing are relocated to the really low wage economies of the third world, a kind of international putting-out system,²⁹ while other jobs such as some kinds of computing and word processing may be relocated in the home as a new form of outwork, thus isolating even paid workers as housewives.

The group of women worst penalised by Tory policies are black and ethnic minority women. Not only are they found in disproportionate numbers in the worst paid sectors and in the most exploitative work, but in some cases their immigrant status makes them even more vulnerable, while even if they are British nationals, racism still operates to prevent their gaining equal access to better jobs. For example, after the Second World War the shortage of nurses led to the creation of a training leading to the qualification of State Enrolled Nurse. This was always seen as an 'inferior' form of qualification, lower in status than the State Registered Nurse's qualification and it was largely black women who were directed into this form of training. Now that the labour of the black SENs is no longer 'needed'—that is the health service is being cut back—the SEN training is being phased out.

Although women higher up the class structure have improved their position relative to women at the bottom of the employment ladder, their position relative to men in their own class has improved very little. Although in 1981 thirteen per cent of women were in managerial and professional jobs, as against eight per cent in 1968, women are still greatly under-represented at the higher levels of professional and managerial employment. For example in further- and higher education, women are most likely to be at the Lecturer I or Lecturer II level. Even there they form only fifteen per cent of all lecturers, but they make up only six per cent of senior lecturers and readers, and three per cent of professors.³⁰

Seventy four per cent of teachers in junior with infant schools are women, but only twenty six per cent of the heads. The figures for the secondary school sector is sixty per cent and sixteen per cent.³¹ In this respect the comprehensive school and co-education have worsened women's career expectations. In the social services, another 'women's profession', sixty four per cent of field social workers are women, but only seven per cent of Directors of social services departments. David Howe, in a recent review of social work points out that 'once you move away from the "shop floor" of direct practice to the very first management levels, men are in the majority.' He adds that this situation merely reflects that found throughout industrial, commercial and public organisations, and he quotes a Manpower Services Commission survey of 1983, which reported that ' "Women hold less than nineteen per cent of all managerial posts. They are concentrated into particular sections of employment such as catering, retail distribution, office management and as publicans. They are usually employed in the more junior levels of management. At the senior levels of management there are fewer women and only 8.3 per cent of general management jobs are held by women." ' Curiously, 'the unequal distribution of female labour is particularly marked in occupations which are seen as traditionally 'female', that is, teaching, social work and nursing.³²

The explanation that Howe advances for this is the well-established one that women's caring role in the home, and the fact that even women in full-time paid work (more likely to be higher up the class and job ladder) do far more housework than their male partners also in full-time work, inhibits their advancement up the professional and managerial hierarchy. They are less likely to apply for senior posts; and when they do, they are less likely to get them. Not for nothing is the media stereotype of the executive woman a childless celibate.

So, while women are increasingly divided along class lines as a result of Tory policies, the Tories have felt no particular need to try to improve the pay and working conditions of the women most likely to be their supporters and whose interests they supposedly represent, the professional and managerial classes. Again, there is no particular 'Thatcherist' strategy. On the contrary, it is the continuity, at least since the 1960s, of this pattern that is striking. Rather than reflecting the decisive break that 'Thatcherism' is alleged to be, it illustrates the persistence of the 1960s notion of 'women's two roles' taken up so enthusiastically by Mrs Thatcher herself. Ironically, as Hilda Scott points out, it is the persistence of this model that is causing women's increasing poverty worldwide:

It is the result of a model of 'progress' that places increasing economic responsibilities on women without redefining their role as the mainstay of family life in the home. By transposing this model onto the very different cultural patterns of the Third World, together with the conditions that produced it, we have helped to create extreme distortions in women's lives on the rest of the globe.³³

The salient feature of Tory government policies seems to have been to intensify existing trends. It is therefore the more bizarre that the 'soft left' has made so much of the 'specificity' of 'Thatcherism'—but perhaps this is a cover for its own lack of an affirmative employment strategy. In the late 1970s sections of the 'broad left' in the labour movement worked to develop what became known as the Alternative Economic Strategy (AES). This combined a plan for industrial expansion and the restoration of full employment, planned controls on foreign trade and international capital movements, the extension of public ownership and of industrial democracy, the control of inflation through price control with increases in public spending and withdrawal from the EEC. It gained considerable support and was acting as a politically unifying focus for the left, although it was not a completed or finished strategy (and no strategy could be) and also was much criticised and debated. In the 1980s, however, these criticisms have transformed themselves into what is a virtual rejection of the AES, on account of its 'old fashioned' reliance on traditional methods and its 'statism'. But the initial spearhead of this attack, for example as mounted by Bob Rowthorn³⁴ and Sam Aaronovitch³⁵ and developed by a number of feminists, was that it 'left out' women. And, while Judith Hunt³⁶ was content to argue that women should be inserted into the AES, Anna Coote³⁷ went further and argued that its whole basis was misguided since 'rather than asking in the first instance; "how can we regenerate industry in order to create full employment?"', we might begin with a different kind of question, such as "how shall we care for and support our children?". . . Much turns on the question, in particular the redistribution of labour and wealth within the family. It does not eclipse the aim of reviving the economy or of redistributing wealth between labour and capital, but sets them in context.' What this actually does is create a false polarisation between the economic interests of women and men. It is as if the correct feminist response to the neglect by male trades unionists of women's needs (and this neglect should not be minimised) is to invert the problem, and *reduce* Britain's economic problems to one of distribution between women and men (Anna Coote's disclaimer notwithstanding). This formulation also reproduces a more general misappropriation of Marxist concepts by the women's movement, whereby the spheres of 'production' and 'reproduction' have tended to be seen (in true Victorian style) as separate spheres rather than as distinct moments in the single circuit of capital. No-one could or should deny that the interests of women and men *do* conflict, for example over the distribution of income within the family, but Anna Coote's formulation fails to acknowledge that male and female workers are also united in their need for the kinds of policy set out in the AES, despite its need to further development.

The failure to develop a coherent strategy based on the AES has left the British labour movement with merely piecemeal economic policies to set against 'Thatcherism', and indeed the left has now become somewhat divided in its approach to the construction of an alternative. For example the Women's TUC has fought consistently and with some success for a new TUC policy on low pay, although the TUC as a whole has been divided on the value of one particular strategy, the guaranteed minimum wage. Another position is to see the decline of manufacturing—and indeed all—jobs brought about by the current 'technological revolution' as inevitable and even as desirable, given that on the one hand (or so it is argued) this will be less destructive of the natural environment, and on the other, paves the way for the possibility of the recognition of unpaid work and of leisure. These arguments have been made, for example, by Hilda Scott and André Gorz,³⁸ as Ellen Meiksins Wood³⁹ points out, such an approach is highly technicist and deterministic; it also gives insufficient weight to the way in which *capitalism* is harnessing technological change.

Many feminists have been particularly critical of the 'male' trades unions and their role in perpetuating (or indeed, it is argued, in creating) the situation whereby women are segregated in a few low-paid, insecure, often part-time areas of unskilled work. As the above discussion of women in the 'primary' sector (that is to say in better unionised sections of the work force) shows this accusation is over-simplified, since women tend to do best where they are best unionised. Some British feminists, Michele Barrett,⁴⁰ and Ann Phillips and Barbara Taylor⁴¹ for example, appear to have been over-impressed by the rather sweeping arguments of Heidi Hartmann,⁴² who in a very influential article argued that trades unions were above all *male* organisations whose historical strategy over the entire industrial period was to exclude women from paid employment. Michele Barrett has given a central place to the development of the concept of the 'family wage' in her account, where despite her emphasis on historical factors, the 'family wage' tends to develop a transhistorical aspect, bearing the same load of meanings in the 1970s as it had in the 1870s. Deborah Thom in a recent article, argues that Heidi Hartman's view, particularly as based on the experience of the First World War, 'is valid in the case of a few small specialist trades unions in war time, . . . but it is not a true description of the fate of the majority of women in general unions'.⁴³ Jane Humphries⁴⁴ has argued that the family wage was a rational strategy for both female and male members of the working class at a particular point in time, while Johanna Brenner and Maria Ramos⁴⁵ have suggested that the historical evidence is more contradictory than Heidi Hartman or Michele Barrett allow.

By far the most simplistic and rhetorically exaggerated approach to this issue, however, is that of Beatrix Campbell who in a series of articles dating back to 1978 has sought to create a one-dimensional image of the

trades unions as 'a muscle-bound Tarzan, a man of few words wielding blunt instruments'.⁴⁶ Her arguments tend to be tautologous, since she accounts for women's position in the labour force as a function and a consequence of their being women and is heedless of divisions in the female workforce such as those described above. It is rather hard to understand why this crudely polemical approach has been so influential among feminists, most of whom are fully aware of the need to take cognisance of the complexity of political struggles. To say this is in no way to deny that male trades unionists often have organised specifically around their interests as (white) men and not in the interests of their class as a whole, but as Angela Weir commented in a recent interview,

It is quite true to say trade unions are male-dominated. All the decision making levels tend to be dominated by white men. That seems to me to be true of all institutions in our society. That is not an argument for devaluing the position of trade unions or for calling them a men's movement.⁴⁷

Central to Beatrix Campbell's attack on the unions at one time was the traditions of collective bargaining 'because of the way they encompass and reproduce women's economic inequality'.⁴⁸ Then her solution was a 'socialist' or 'feminist' incomes strategy⁴⁹ but this has been less influential among feminists than her general critique of the unions, for it implies an incomes policy, and as Mary McIntosh and Angela Weir⁵⁰ have argued, an incomes policy implies a belief that state legislation will be more effective in improving the position of women than collective bargaining by the unions, a conclusion they dispute, and they also demonstrate that, contrary to what Beatrix Campbell has argued, the Equal Pay Act (1975) did bring some temporary improvement in women's relative rates of pay, (Beatrix Campbell argues that the improvement was due to the incomes policies of the mid-1970s).

Joan Smith, in the American context, insists that the *attacks* on trades unions must be an issue for women as well as for men, since the attacks on unions and thus on workers' rights have been one cause of the *casualisation* of women's aid work and their increasing ghettoisation in low-paid, part-time work. ♦♦ The final weakness, therefore, of Beatrix Campbell's arguments is that, coming at a time when the unions are in any case under attack, they concentrate so entirely on the demolition of male privilege and lack any sense of a positive and unifying strategy.

In any case, careful empirical work such as that of Sheila Cunnison,⁵¹ suggests that unions' attitudes and practice are more variable than writers such as Beatrix Campbell and Anna Coote⁵² have allowed. Her study of school meals staff revealed important differences in their attitudes towards the women employees between the officials (male in each case) of the unions involved, the General and Municipal Workers Union, and the National Union of Public Employees:

While the NUPE branch secretary had gone out of his way to encourage and take women on union demonstrations he still despaired of any serious commitment on their behalf to the branch itself.

The officers of the G & M were more extreme in their attitudes towards women and openly advocated a family wage. They claimed that the women in their branch supported them in this, as had been shown on an occasion some years back, when the women voted against equal pay. . . The paid officials of the G & M were not so much critical of the women as sorry for them. . .

The attitude of NUPE's paid officials was different. They spoke of women, not in terms of secondary earners, but as labour grossly exploited by their employers. . . Efforts were made to get women involved. . . Sexism sometimes crept in. . . but mostly it was kept well in check. . .

NUPE women shop stewards were encouraged by officials to attend the first evening course for women trade unionists put on in the city, and they were the only stewards to stay the course. And NUPE has begun putting on its own weekend bridging courses for women stewards or women interested in becoming stewards: a *crèche* is provided. . . . NUPE's attitude towards its women members must stem from the fact that it is. . . a women's union: its numbers and its subscriptions come from women, and its chief problem is low pay which is mainly a problem of women's jobs. There is a marked contrast to the G & M where only a third of the members were ~~women~~.⁵⁸

Although the printworkers are often cited as the supreme example of an overpaid, overmanned, masculine redoubt, it is important to note that after *The Times* lockout in 197819 workers' wages and conditions improved considerably, and these advances benefitted *women* workers. For example, the pay of some clerical workers rose from £42 to £164 per week, gross, and the clerical staff also won a nine day fortnight (which Rupert Murdoch is now attempting to take away). The maternity agreement then negotiated gave women workers six months maternity leave on full pay, and this agreement reflected the view of SOGAT that the issue was *not* opposition to new technology by the unions but rather that the new technology should benefit workers as well as newspaper proprietors (*Morning Star*, 22.3.86).

To summarise, it appears that if the Thatcher governments have had no single coherent strategy for women workers in terms of relocating them in the home, then this merely reflects the way in which capitalism seeks to achieve the restructuring process in a variety of ways. Marge Mayo has argued that the greater 'disposability' of women workers is but one of a number of issues women should look at in arriving at a comprehensive analysis of their own position in the labour force, and that the question of the reserve army of labour thesis and its applicability to women is a more complex question than feminists have sometimes allowed: 'To focus upon disposability is to concentrate upon the distribution of the costs of industrial restructuring in terms of gender, rather than to locate these within the restructuring process itself.' Marge Mayo argues that women must look at the specific differences in strategy adopted by different sections of capital:

Successful capital tends to become more capital-intensive, and thus tends to dispose of labour, including the most readily disposable labour as well as the more skilled and organised sections of labour. While women may be disposed of in the rationalisation process, they may, alternatively, by that very process of **de-skilling**, even be drawn into the production process. . . Even if the concentration as well as the centralisation of capitals has been the dominating underlying trend, not every capitalist can, or does pursue such an option at any particular time. On the contrary, when such an option is not available—for example, to the small employer in a relatively low technology industry—alternative strategies have to be pursued, typically involving an increase in the pressure on labour. . . for example the expansion of self-employment, that is the use of lump labour (formally self-employed, de facto casualised) and the relatively increased use of **homeworkers**.⁵⁵

Unemployment

It is now generally recognised that official statistics underestimate the numbers of women who are unemployed. Since 1982 these statistics have been derived from DHSS benefit data, which is a headcount of the number of individuals in receipt of benefit through unemployment. This omits many women, particularly married women, from the statistics because their benefit entitlement is affected by their pattern of employment—as part-timers they may have earned too little to qualify for National Insurance benefit **and/or** as mothers who have taken time out to have children their employment record may be too intermittent for them to have built up entitlement. And even apart from this, in 1978 about sixty per cent of married women were still paying the reduced 'married women's stamp' which did not entitle them to benefit in their own right. There is also evidence that even women who are eligible often do not register or claim, for a variety of reasons.

At the same time the traditional view that married women do not need to work in the same way that men do appears still to be quite dominant, and a corollary of this is the further view that the experience of unemployment is less destructive to women than to men. There are, however, a number of objections to this view. For one thing, as the number of single-parent headed household mounts (and eighty seven per cent of these are headed by women) women are increasingly becoming main breadwinners in families. Secondly, research suggests that many women earn as much or nearly as much as their male partners, so that their wage cannot be said to be secondary or pin money. Thirdly, there is evidence that unemployment **does** adversely affect women, giving rise to depression, loss of independence and loss of sources of social support. It is also likely to lead to their deskilling when and if they re-enter the labour market. Jennie Popay⁵⁶ points out that despite all this research into the economic, social and psychological effects of unemployment has concentrated overwhelmingly on men. **A man's** unemployment, however, affects the rest of his family as well as himself, both economically and in other ways. For example, Lorna McKee and Colin Bell⁵⁶ argue that it is usually the woman

who bears the brunt of the extra work involved in getting by on very little money:

'It was often the wives who had to live on their wits, variously hunting down bargains, devising new "economic meals", locating borrowing sources, placating hungry children, refusing children spending money on treats, patching or mending clothes, going without food or taking less nutritional meals themselves and sometimes dealing with creditors. There is too some evidence of wives protecting their husbands from the financial reality or concealing their own worries about money. . . Shopping was reported by many to be a very elaborate routine involving visits to numerous stores and to an array of markets, rummage sales, charity events, buying one item here and one item there, finding the lowest price.'

Also, while women do not shed their domestic work when they enter the paid labour force, men tend not to assume the domestic burden when they become unemployed, even if their wife is still undertaking paid work; while the presence of the male partner during the day may be experienced by his wife as an intrusion on her domain entailing extra work for her (for example the provision of a midday meal) and the loss of whatever independent social life she may have had. Sometimes, moreover, the wives of unemployed men may be less likely to look for work themselves because of the wound to their partners' self-esteem.

Thatcherism and Welfare

The unequal position of women in the family and the assignment to them of unpaid domestic labour has become a mainstay of the feminist analysis of women's subordination, and it is around social policy issues that the spectre of women's enforced return to the home, or, as the CPAG puts it, their 'redomestication',⁵⁸ has seemed most threatening in the feminist analysis. This is for the good reason that the Conservatives have used a rhetoric of 'the family' to justify cutbacks in welfare and have a clear commitment to the view that the welfare state actively undermines individual responsibility. Keynesian and Fabian approaches on the other hand have sought to extend and defend public, collective welfare provision very often precisely on the same grounds, that is, that it supports and strengthens the family.

Paul Corrigan⁵⁹ and others who support the 'Thatcherism' thesis have argued that 'Thatcherism' orchestrates a widely held popular disenchantment with welfare provision and with the welfare state, but this view is now being increasingly challenged by left writers on social policy.⁶⁰ There is little evidence of popular disenchantment with welfare provision as such. In the wake of the 1986 Council elections and two by-elections, at which the Tories did extremely badly, what was at stake was the failure of the Conservative government to provide adequate provision in the health and education sectors. Martin Loney points out that the Con-

servative victory in 1979 was not, in any case, the landslide that sections of the left proclaimed it to be, for 'with 43.9 per cent of the votes cast, Margaret Thatcher came to power with the smallest proportion received by any majority party since 1922'. He cites a 1980 MORI survey, which suggested that while there was a mandate for social security cuts (forty four per cent favoured a cut as opposed to nine per cent who favoured an increase) only five per cent wanted education cuts, while thirty six per cent wanted an increase in spending in this area. Fifty seven per cent wanted NHS spending increased and only five per cent favoured a cut. Moreover, by 1983 these figures had moved further in the direction of support for higher spending, for example fifty five per cent now wanted an increase in education spending, and only three per cent wanted a cut. It was even the case that only twenty three per cent now wanted cuts in social security benefits, the number of those wanting an increase having risen to nineteen per cent.⁶¹

Martin Loney concludes that the promise of tax cuts is more likely to have contributed to the Conservative party's victory, and of course most opinion polls show that a majority of the population appears to favour both tax cuts and an expanded welfare state, which is understandable if illogical. And indeed, this reaction is at bottom a rational one, given that for many years, whatever government has been in power, the tax threshold has continued to fall, so that today the lower paid are far more heavily taxed, proportionately speaking, than those at the top, and few even of the lowest paid workers escape taxes altogether.

It is not that an erosion of support for the welfare state has occurred (although Martin Loney does not mention the rather special case of council house sales); but rather that Keynesian welfare capitalism has been increasingly unable to deliver the goods. Britain's continuous economic decline and the Labour Party's **attempts** when in power to maintain Keynesian welfare capitalism were always restricted by support for American foreign policy and consequent high spending on defence, and the domination of the Treasury. The strategy also relied on the substitution of a general rise in real incomes and spending power for a redistribution of wealth. Given the weaknesses of the social democratic approach to welfare, the anti-welfare position that has always existed in the Conservative Party (as early as 1952 Enoch Powell and Iain Mcleod were arguing for a return to the means test⁶²) and which had been developed by the Institute for Economic Affairs since the 1960s, was able to gain the ascendancy as the only alternative to Keynesian Fabianism, given that the Labour Party was certainly not going to pose the left alternative. In this context, Martin Loney argues, monetarism provided a rallying point and appeared, to disillusioned Keynesians as much as to the radical right, as a solution to 'stagflation'. In the second half of the 1970s Denis Healey and James Callaghan fell prey to the influential arguments

of Bacon and Ellis⁶³ that public welfare spending was an unproductive burden on the economy. The 'Great Moving Right Show' was therefore a movement within 'the Left' rather than a movement within the populace.

Yet in one way the irony of the past seven years has been that in absolute terms welfare spending has increased because of the social security benefits paid out to the unemployed, while state spending on defence and law and order has also mounted. On the other hand under Mrs Thatcher the government have done everything in their power to cut back on welfare wherever possible, lowering the real value of benefits, introducing and raising charges, and privatising services. They have widened the division between the really poor and the rest of the population and have eagerly fostered the stigmatisation of the poor. This has particularly affected women, since as has already been noted, women are more likely to be in poverty than men. Neither Peter Townsend⁶⁴ in his huge survey of the subject, nor, more recently Martin Loney, discusses gender and poverty as a distinct issue. Yet women suffer the brunt of welfare cuts, just as they have suffered the brunt of the Tories' employment policies. For example, pensioners are one of the groups most likely to be in poverty, and there are twice as many women in this category as there are men. Single parents are another category of those most likely to be in poverty, and more than three-quarters of one parent households are headed by women. Moreover, although the common assumption is that poverty in families is shared around on an equal basis, what little evidence there is suggests that the division of income *within* the family is unequal and that today, as has for long been the case, it is the wife/mother who is the most likely to do without essential food, clothing and pocket money. Cuts in welfare have also tended to come at the expendable end—in services such as school meals and home helps. These too are women's jobs, so women sustain a double loss, since they lose their paid work and at the same time the work is returned to the home, where they are expected to do it unpaid as part of their 'labour of love'. Dulcie Groves and Janet Finch⁶⁵ argue that the care of the elderly and disabled in their own homes is a low cost solution for the government, and that the refusal to pay the Invalid Care Allowance to married women was to keep this form of 'community care' as cheap as possible. The emphasis on family care is therefore expedient, although the existence of a traditional ideology of women in the family serves its purpose well.

The Green Paper on the tax system, published in **1980**, then abandoned under the onslaught of criticism it received from all sides, but tentatively reintroduced in the 1986 budget, illustrates the way in which the Tories are inhibited from introducing wholesale reactionary measures in relation to women both because of conflicting pressures from outside and because of their own ambivalence. On the one hand, in this case, they wished not to penalise the wife with an unearned investment income; on the other

hand they wanted the non-working wife not to be penalised by comparison with the working wife. They were prepared to admit that it is 'out of date' to aggregate a husband's and wife's tax as the husband's, and admitted that this had become very unpopular; yet they shrank from the more radical solutions for progressive forms of tax and cash benefits put forward by groups such as CPAG and Rights of Women⁶⁶ (but then the Labour Party is not very receptive to these either). Instead a 'transferable allowance' was proposed, whereby if one partner (likely in practice to be the wife) was not working, her allowance might be transferred to the spouse. The way in which this was to be organised in relation to part-time work was criticised as being likely to act as a disincentive to wives to engage in paid work in many cases; and it also re-introduced the married man's tax allowance by stealth.

More recent proposals, as embodied in Norman Fowler's Social Security Review, will, if enacted, have dire effects on all claimants, but because so many of the poorest are women, these proposals will again affect the female half of the population disproportionately. For example, the proposal to abolish child benefit and return it to the 'breadwinner's' pay packet in the form of a tax credit was made and defeated in the early 1970s. Indeed Eleanor Rathbone, as an MP, had to fight hard in 1945 to ensure that the original family allowance was paid in cash to mothers and did not simply disappear into the male pay packet. It seems that the battle will now have to be fought a third time, since even if child benefit is to remain untouched under the proposals, Family Income Supplement, at present payable in cash to mothers in families with a low income (although in work), is to be returned to the father's pay packet. In addition, free school meals are to be withdrawn from half a million school children; even the poorest households will have to pay one fifth of their rates; and there are a number of other proposals which will be draconian in their effects on the poor. Worst for women, there will be changes in the state earnings-related pension scheme which will provide pensions, no longer on the best twenty years of earnings, but on average earnings. This particularly affects women, whose average earnings are much lower than those of men (Guardian, 2.6.86). In their passage through both houses of Parliament, however, these measures have been torn to shreds. Therefore, and we shall see later that this also applies to recent attempts to impose censorship on representations of homosexuality, on this as on other occasions 'Thatcherist' measures have not had an easy passage, nor have they been uncontested. This is further evidence against the 'Thatcherism' thesis, which tends to present recent Tory policies as both more popular and more overwhelming than they have proved to be.

Women have also been disproportionately affected by cuts in health, education, housing and social services. In education, for example, even the Conservative Party was by 1981 prepared at least to pay lip service to the

idea that sex discrimination exists in schools, acknowledging in their discussion document of that year that there was a need to avoid such discrimination, while 'efforts [should be] made to prevent traditional differences in the education of boys and girls exercising *too strong an influence*'.⁶⁷ (Italics added.)

Women, however, are the main customers of adult education, where some of the severest cuts have been made, while cuts in discretionary grants and university funding, together with a reduction of places in polytechnics, have made it particularly difficult for women to enter further and higher education. Women are much more likely to be found in the arts, humanities and social sciences, where major cuts have been made, than in the pure and applied sciences, which have been protected. Furthermore, while it is mature women in particular who have been making increased demands on the educational system, cuts in public child care provision have made it more difficult than ever for them to pursue their learning and training goals.

Similarly, in the NHS, while the 'prestige' areas of acute medicine and surgery (for example, heart surgery) have maintained most of their support, areas that have always been the Cinderella sectors of the health services, such as geriatrics and mental health, have suffered unduly; again, it is here that most women patients are to be found. The rationalisation of maternity and obstetric services has also in many cases meant a deterioration in care for women and their babies.

' "What I am desperately trying to do," said Mrs Thatcher in **1983**, "is to create one nation with everyone being a man of property." ⁶⁸ This perhaps says more than Mrs Thatcher intended, because it is unlikely that she intended her policy of the sale of council houses to have negative results for women. The policy has been very popular, and unfortunately this has led the Labour Party to try to develop similar proposals—unfortunately, because this form of tenure is ultimately based on the nuclear family unit with one, or preferably more, wage earners. Since **1979** both mortgage defaults and mortgage arrears (particularly in poor areas) have increased as has neglect of maintenance and repairs; these trends indicate the problems of this form of tenure at times of high unemployment, when marital break-up has become common (at present one in three marriages end in separation or divorce) and when the population is ageing. Naturally these problems affect women and men, but as in all areas of welfare women are more vulnerable because, being less likely to have access to a steady income of their own and being therefore more likely to be in poverty, they are more likely to have access only to the worst housing. Owner occupation causes problems at the time of marital break-up, although where there are children of the marriage, the wife does have rights in relation to the marital home; it is of direct benefit only to women as widows, but by that time many women will lack an income sufficient

to keep the house adequately **maintained**.⁶⁹

The other side of the coin to the sale of council houses is the rise in homelessness, due in part to the inability of local authorities to continue to build new stocks owing to the policies of the present government, so that those who cannot afford to buy are more and more likely to be left in 'residual' housing of poor quality or in unattractive locations. Women are again particularly vulnerable, whether they are in residual public housing or in accommodation for the homeless.

The Thatcher welfare picture, then, is, broadly speaking, similar to the situation found in women's employment. While the underlying imperative of Tory policies is the desire to cut back public spending, to privatise and to increase productivity, the results bear disproportionately upon women. Women are less likely—particularly if they have young children—to be earning a full-time wage, and their consequent poverty makes them both more dependent on state welfare and more exposed to its growing deficiencies.

Values, Morality, Culture and Personal Life

Although I have emphasised the ambivalence of the Conservative party's rhetoric of family and family responsibility, I do not deny that it has special resonance for women. Yet it is fair to say that this theme, which in any case does not originate with the Conservatives, does not especially emphasise the *subordination* of women, certainly not overtly. Whereas the radical right—and even sections of the left—in the United States *have* openly called for the restoration of specifically patriarchal values and for a move away from women's **equality**,⁷⁰ in Britain emphasis is laid more on the parental control of children, and on the family as the central institution in an individualistic and competitive society:

'The sense of being self-reliant, of paying one's way, are all part of the spiritual ballast which maintains responsible citizenship, and provides a solid foundation from which people look around to see what more they might do **for** others and for themselves.'

In some quarters this does from time to time slip over into a call for a return to patriarchal values. For example, the response of *The Times* main leader writer to the Fowler Review of Social Security (*The Times*, 3.7.84) was to argue that:

Like it or not—poverty professionals do not—the public express [*sic*] reservations about social benefits paid universally; tests of means and need are widely regarded **as** necessary in disbursing public money to the poor; in the eyes of many such payments are tainted **as** charity or dole. Those who would substitute for the present (complex) system some more clean-cut and well-ordered scheme would do well to remember that there is a moral element to the alleviation of poverty

and that the 'stigma' of receiving public doles may yet be an uncomfortable but indigenous element in the British social make-up and that the occasionally atavistic attitude taken by taxpayers in work towards certain classes of benefit receivers is rooted not in some conspiracy of popular newspapers but in a commendable faith in an ethic of labour and masculine responsibility.⁷³ (Italics added.)

Yet the British Right does not speak with one voice on the issue of women and the family. On the one hand there is the far-right philosopher, Roger Scruton, who views the moral responsibility of women as being to tame the dark and inherently violent sexuality of men,⁷³ but Ferdinand Mount, who wrote an influential book on the family,⁷⁴ and who was Mrs Thatcher's speech writer in the early 1980s (he may have written her speech quoted earlier in this article, which expresses views similar to those found in his book), regards the family as a subversive and anti-authoritarian institution, constantly embattled throughout history against both church and State, in East and West alike. To him, the family represents freedom, democracy and an enhanced status for women rather than authority—again a view typical of liberal social sciences thinking in the 1950s and 1960s.

Symptomatic of this strand in the new Toryism is the recent emergence of Emma Nicholson, currently Vice-chairman [*sic*] of the Conservative Party, with special responsibility for women. She has set about changing the face of the Tory Woman, and has increased the number of women on the Conservative Central Office candidates list from eight to over 100. In addition, however, to trying to increase the visibility and power of women inside the party, she is writing policy documents and building support for a number of measures that are progressive for women. 'She organised the Conservative National Women's Committee into conducting a nationwide survey on women and tax and that report came back with a strong call for separate taxation. . . They strongly criticised the government's new policy for giving wives at home tax allowances which would be a disincentive for women to go out to work. . . Three working party reports call for the invalid care allowance to be given to all married women, for equal employment protection for part-time workers and they criticise the government's plan to make the statutory maternity allowance payable by the employer instead of the DHSS. They not only support the Warnock Committee on embryo research, but call for more NHS provision for infertile women to have in vitro fertilisation.'⁷⁵ Moreover, Emma Nicholson has regular discussions with Mrs Thatcher, and says, ' "Don't think I am doing all this without support from the very top." '⁷⁶

It is perhaps too simple, therefore, to see Mrs Thatcher's Toryism as having a clear cut commitment to the subordination of women. Rather, women are to be treated primarily as members of their class, with some hopes of advancement for the women of the business and professional classes who have for many years formed the backbone of Tory grassroots support, but with prospects of ever-increasing poverty and repression for

working women, poor women and women from the black community and ethnic minorities.

'Thatcherism' on the other hand does take issue with the so-called 'permissive society'—although again, hostility to 'permissiveness' pre-dates the rise of Mrs Thatcher. Sir Keith Joseph was fulminating against it in the early 1970s, and there has been a persistent right-wing discourse in Britain that has perceived the disintegration of traditional family life as a threat to social order, particularly because it sets the youth (of both sexes) free. Sexual promiscuity and divorce are always seen as dangerous, and in some cases the freeing of women is seen as particularly alarming. In 1960, for example, Lord Denning gave a speech in which he suggested:

We ought to remember that there has been one time previously in the history of the world when women achieved a considerable measure of equality. It was in the Roman Empire, and it should serve as a warning of the dangers to which equality may give rise. . . Women, who had been virtuous slaves, became free and dissolute; divorce became common. The rich ceased to have children. This decay of morality was indeed one of the factors in the fall of the Roman Empire. Let us look upon this and take heed."⁷⁸

Today, the concern with decay and degeneration remains; it is less, not more likely to be linked to the emancipation of women. In this context it is significant, as Lynne Segal has pointed out,⁷⁸ that whereas the Right in the United States has mounted a ferocious and successful attack on women's rights of all kinds, in this country the Tory party of the Thatcher government has always proclaimed an officially 'neutral' policy on abortion, divorce and homosexual rights. Mrs Gillick's attempts to outlaw contraceptive advice for girls under sixteen years of age unless parents are informed has proved less powerful than the counter-attacks by the medical profession, who realise all too well the disastrous implications of such a policy. Of course, the reasons why the Right is ultimately more sympathetic towards the idea of contraception for young women than it is towards bolstering up parental control (the reasons, that is, why Mrs Gillick has had only half-hearted support from the Tory Rightwing) has little to do with the emancipation of women, and is more likely to hark back to the eugenicist pronouncements of Sir Keith Joseph, who argued in 1974:

The balance of our population, our human stock, is threatened. . . a high and rising number of children are being born to mothers least fitted to bring children into the world and to bring them up, they are born to mothers who were first pregnant in adolescence in social classes four and five. . . They are producing problem children, the future unmarried mothers, delinquents, denizens of our borstals, sub-normal educational establishments, prisons, hostels for drifters."⁷⁹

Unspoken in this lurks the implicit racist assumption that it is black

women, black mothers and black families that are the biggest problem of all. (Contraceptive advice for unmarried women became the official policy of the Family Planning Association in Britain only when in the 1960s there was a fear that the numbers of women coming into this country from the Caribbean would lead to an increase in the number of black children born here.⁸⁰)

Yet even if racist views and attitudes hostile to the liberation of women long ante-date 'Thatcherism', the embittered, divided and decaying society that Mrs Thatcher's economic and social policies have done so much to promote does provide a fertile soil for the growth of these virulent views and for increasing violence towards all those who are vulnerable. In this context it is interesting that Mrs Thatcher's administration has neither developed a strong family policy nor done much to curb the commercial exploitation of sexuality. Given the government's high moral profile, the absence of a family policy is rather astonishing (although no doubt feminists would be very critical of any family policy that did emerge from 'Thatcherism'); but in another way it merely demonstrates that 'Thatcherism' is not a coherent ideology, but rather a set of responses, the gut reactions, as it were, of what Martin Loney calls the 'politics of greed'.

In this, as in other governments, 'moral issues' have been left to private members' bills. Recently one such bill, sponsored by Winston Churchill, attempted to restrict the representation of obscene, violent or sexual material on television. Its implications were wide, and it would have had the effect of, for example, banning pictures of Nazi concentration camps or of productions of *King Lear*, although attempts were made to placate some of its critics by redrafting it in such a way that the distinctions between 'art' and 'filth' formalised in the 1959 Obscene Publications Act would be preserved. It appears that its main intention, however, was to ban 'explicit homosexual acts' from the small screen, and that it was in part a response to the screening of an overtly homoerotic film, Derek Jarman's *Sebastiane*, on Channel Four. This bill failed at its second reading. However, as Simon Watney pointed out 'widely supported across the party political spectrum, . . . it far exceeded any form of censorship yet proposed in this most censored of western nations. A mere thirty one Labour MPs voted against the measure yet had it got through it would have guaranteed a complete criminalisation of all images of homosexuality within British culture'. So far, then, from there being a distinctively 'New Right' approach on this issue, the Labour Party and the 'Left' have tailed the Right on what they feel is a political vote catcher.

The other most notable attempt to harass homosexuals has been the attack on Gay's the Word bookshop in London by HM Customs and Excise. In raids on the bookshop and private houses of women and men working there, customs officials seized 142 imported books, many of which were not by any stretch of the imagination 'obscene'. Subsequently

the directors and managers of the **bookshop** were committed for trial, but in June 1986 all charges were dropped. Ostensibly this was because of a legal anomaly; however, it seems likely that the decision to cancel the trial had as much to do with a recognition that harassment of this kind of the lesbian and gay community is out of line with public opinion. This defeat for the forces of repression again illustrates the weakness of the 'great moving right show' thesis, which does not tally with the oscillations of public opinion and the general failure of the fundamentalist right in this country to turn the clock back.

Since 1959 there has been a consensus around the liberal distinction between the public and private spheres, whereby, in relation to sexual conduct a freedom is permissible in the private sphere that is denied in the public sphere where regulation has been extended in a number of ways. As Mandy Merck points out, television breaches this dichotomy—public representations in the privacy of the home; and Annette Kuhn has argued that women, too, have proved difficult to fit into the model:

'Within legal discourse, women occupy a constantly shifting position, in terms of vulnerability, need for protection and also of civil rights, between the poles of childhood and adulthood, consent and its absence, regulation and **non-regulation**, public and private.'

'Thatcherism' has never really challenged the terms of the debate, and while a **rightwing** administration is still more likely than a Labour one to be vulnerable to pressure from the likes of Mrs Whitehouse (although recent feminist positions on pornography may have shifted this to some extent) there seems little desire to curb offensive representations of women. When Labour MP Clare Short tried to introduce a bill in the House of Commons to curb sexist representations of women such as 'page three' pin-ups she was subjected to a **barrage** of sexist abuse from her largely male audience.

Prostitution (largely ignored by the left and even by feminists, as well as by the right) appears to have been on the increase during recent years, and this is not surprising, given the lack of alternative sources of income for many women, especially very young ones. But although local vice squads have cleaned up their areas from time to time, it has not been a major focus of Tory concern, and on the contrary current social and economic policies indirectly encourage prostitution. This is merely another example of the indirect and often unintentional implications for women of the Thatcher government's determination to leave industry and business fully exposed to the 'free market', while denying individuals the right to any form of social protection other than 'the family'. It is this, rather than any explicit attempt to do away with women's rights that is characteristic of this government; it is the withdrawal of possibilities of

paid work on the one hand and of collective welfare rights as an alternative or supplement to family provision that leave women especially at risk.

The public outcry against the battering of women that surfaced in the 1970s has to some extent died away in the 1980s. Some of the refuges set up and often (although by no means always) funded by local authorities or urban aid grants have had to close, but in so far as they are still struggling on, often on the basis of voluntary help, this may be quite acceptable to the current Tory philosophy of 'community care' and self-help. On the other hand, although male violence is not simply an effect of the recession, there is some evidence that violence in the home increases with high unemployment, so in this as in so many other areas punitive economic policies have reverberations that extend far beyond the economic sphere.

Throughout most of the post-war period legislation on so-called moral issues has tended to come about through the mechanism of the private member's bill and a free vote in the House of Commons. Although most of the 'permissive' legislation of the 1960s was passed during the Labour governments of the period (although some measures date from the Macmillan and post-Macmillan Tory era)⁸³ the law relating to divorce, homosexuality, the death penalty, suicide and abortion were taken as 'issues of conscience', issues outside politics. In practice this has meant that the bipartisan nature of so much of British politics carried over into the sphere of personal behaviour as well. It was just this 'non-political' sphere that the women's liberation movement of the 1970s aimed to politicise, but paradoxically it may be a measure of its failure to do so that the backlash from the radical right has so far been relatively mild. On the other hand, although there were several attempts between 1975 and 1980 to tighten up the law relating to abortion, it was possible for the women's movement to construct a wide popular movement that included the trades unions, and thereby to prevent restrictions on abortion; indeed, as I suggested earlier, the publicity generated by the attempts to restrict may have moved public opinion further in the direction of liberalism on this issue. Yet the major political parties have continued to be very hesitant to put women's issues firmly within the parameters of political debate. It was largely through the combined efforts of feminists and a very few dedicated women Labour MPs, especially Jo Richardson, in the 1970s that the attacks on abortion were halted. It was also with Jo Richardson's help that the 1976 Domestic Violence and Matrimonial Homes Act was passed, which gave women some greater protection against violence from partners and rights relating to their homes, rights extended in this case to cohabitants, who have often been rather ill protected by the law.

Nothing further has been done to improve women's position since 1979, but there has been no formal attack on women's rights. There is,

moreover, one 'moral' or 'women's' issue on which Mrs Thatcher herself has taken a stand: rape. She has condemned rape, and has called for more severe penalties. Yet this is also part of her tough stand on law and order, and condemnation and long prison sentences are of only limited use to women in a society in which the circumstances that make rape possible are allowed to multiply. Women are especially vulnerable when they have to work unsocial hours, for example late at night, and have to rely on an increasingly unreliable public transport system to get home. And, despite the outcry against rape, there has been no attempt to change the law to make rape within marriage an offence. This has great symbolic significance, and a change in the law, together with better protection for battered women, would be a recognition that violence on the picket line, on the football stands or in the streets is still rare by comparison with domestic violence. Women are far more likely to encounter violence within the home than outside it.

The true nature of 'Victorian values' for the Tory Party was perhaps most blatantly revealed during the Cecil Parkinson/Sara Keays affair. Both the women's political career and her personal life were to be sacrificed to the man's; the most important thing was for the government to be protected from scandal.* These really **were** the values of the Victorian bourgeoisie: public rectitude and private licence, the sexual double standard, women penned up within the home, or cast into degradation and disgrace outside it. In the Victorian period, however, at least some women were protected, however stifling that protection may have been, by a still patriarchal family. Today, women's place in the family has been eroded, while their place in the public world of work and on the streets is not established—men do not unambivalently concede their right to be there. Today, all women are women of the streets, in one sense, and 'Thatcherism' has done nothing to extend protection to women in the public sphere; quite the contrary.

The most frightening aspect of the Tory regime has been the way in which the police have developed into a force that is above the law, and which the Tory party does not really control. It is truly alarming that their major role has been increasingly as a para-military force for use against the working class and in particular against the trades unions and black youth. Paradoxically this has left women—both old women in their homes and young women in the streets—increasingly vulnerable to burglars, muggers and rapists. A recent survey of one Inner London borough, Islington, showed that half of all the women interviewed were afraid ever to go out at night.⁸⁵ Again, this disproportionately affects poor and working class women, since the long-term Tory prejudice in favour of the motor industry and against public transport has increasingly meant that the only safe—or often the only—way to get about in off-peak hours is in a car, to which, even today, relatively few working class women have

access.

Thus the very law and order scenario which the Tories regard as their own has actually made women less rather than more safe. For crime has escalated, while the police have retreated behind their wall of perspex shields.

Conclusion

In conclusion therefore, we have to re-emphasise the contradictory and ambiguous nature of Conservative party policy in relation to women during the past seven years, and insist that while there is little evidence for the 'worst' scenario of feminists—the unambivalent return of women to the home—what has actually happened to women since Mrs Thatcher may be even worse than this 'worst': their exploitation in the worst paid and least protected jobs has been intensified, they have been exposed to greater risk of violence both at home and in the streets, their unpaid labour in the home has if anything increased as what little welfare support there was has been eroded, and the Tories have then had the effrontery implicitly to blame women as parents for juvenile delinquency and the decay of morals.

Yet against those who would see in 'Thatcherism' some new kind of ideological monster, thus implicitly justifying a return—hopefully—with the next Labour government to the good old days of Keynesian consensus. I should like to end by quoting the *New Statesman's* epitaph to the fifties. As Raymond Williams⁸⁶ has perceptively pointed out, we would almost all like to return to the politics of consensus, because it seems so much safer, so much less frightening. But it seems unlikely that this option remains open. And in any case those lamented decades, rosy in retrospect, were to a dismayingly large extent built on the assumed subordination of women, and depended on that subordination remaining unchallenged (not to mention that of blacks); at the same time, when we compare the two, how much really has changed?

Few tears will be shed for the fifties. Cynical, meretricious, selfish, the decade made the rich richer, the poor poorer. To the advanced countries of the West it brought unprecedented prosperity, achieved largely at the expense of the vast and growing proletariats of Africa and Asia. . .

The Tories imprisoned homosexuals and prostitutes—and pacifists. But they allowed the striptease joints and the drinking clubs to multiply. . . They made Britain into a windfall state, a national casino with loaded dice; and when violence and dishonesty increased they clamoured for the birch.⁸⁷

This, however, is not quite the end. I hope I have demonstrated that the policies of the Tory governments since 1979 have not meant a return to the home for women, but have facilitated their increasing incorporation into the paid labour force on the worst possible *terms*; their future is not a

return to the patriarchal foyer, but rather the ghetto of low-paid, casualised work. Equally, their destiny is not a return to Victorian notions of feminine sexual submissiveness or to a renewed insistence on the double standard as it operated forty—or one hundred—years ago. A double standard still exists; but inexorably the nuclear family continues to disintegrate and the commodification of sex proceeds apace. Women's lives have become harder, more dangerous, more exhausting under Mrs Thatcher, but not in the way the 'Thatcherism' thesis envisaged. It may seem that it matters very little whether or not we call the process 'Thatcherism' or whether we agree or not about the process, if the results are immiseration and intensified exploitation in either case. Yet it does matter. The 'Thatcherism' thesis misunderstands the nature of the restructuring that is occurring, and its remedies therefore do not fit the case. The proponents of the thesis, because they see the main threat to women as being a return to the home equally see the main priority as promoting women's (as opposed to men's) work. It does not matter if industry is declining, since most women's jobs are in the service sector anyway. Therefore men are pitted, ultimately, against women. Veronica Beechey, for example, in the article cited earlier, to some extent at least welcomes the increase in part-time women's work.

What both women and men, however, should be arguing and struggling for, is the revitalisation of industry in order to give both women and men access to well-paid jobs in the mainstream of the economy, not casualised work on the margins. Secondly, the 'soft Left' have not developed coherent policies to match the situation of the disintegrating family and changes in the moral climate. On the one hand they have tended to borrow from one particular section of the women's movement the over-emphasis on pornography as the central issue for women. This is a massive displacement of the real issues, and it would be more valuable to formulate coherent social policies along the following lines: much more state support in the shape of refuges and access to good housing, adequate social security and other services including child care facilities and training or retraining for paid work is needed if women and children are to be given a real avenue of escape from violent men and violence in the home. Further, if women are to gain real equality and independence within marriage they need access to social security in their own right, not as the appendage of a husband or lover, that is, all forms of social security should be disaggregated, and women, married or single, should have the right, as citizens, to claim as individuals. There needs to be a move away from the unthinking (or perhaps deliberately calculated) dependence of the Labour Party on half-baked notions of 'traditional family values'. The traditional (i.e. the patriarchal) family is not going to return; instead there should be a proper recognition of the value of a plurality of ways of living. Laws to limit the offensive representation of women can do very little to change women's

lives. It is when women are free and equal that they will be able to live differently, will have real choice whether to marry or bring up children on their own, or to remain childless. Only then will the way in which they are viewed in society change; a pornographic ideology cannot be legislated away on its own while its material basis remains intact.

A massive redistribution of wealth along class lines, as Angela Weir and I argued in our article in *New Left Review*, is therefore the policy most likely to benefit women (or blacks). Feminists who regard themselves also as socialists cannot simply fight for their own corner, as Tory women can. That would be to ensure advancement for the few, but little or nothing for the many. There really is no way out but for feminists to continue the often difficult and frustrating task of keeping class and gender politics together. It is to the shame of the proponents of 'Thatcherism' that they have caused division where they should have sought to unite. Increasingly, as Mrs Thatcher has pressed on with her wholehearted attack on the working class—with very specific and disastrous results for women and blacks—the 'new Left' has posed race and gender issues against those of class, the politics of fragmentation rather than the politics of alliance and unity. Yet women are increasingly at the forefront of the industrial struggle. Let us hope, therefore, that if a Labour government is returned at the next election, as now seems possible, their needs and demands will be recognised as central to a new social and economic order and that the so-called 'pluralist' left politics of the 1980s does not lead to their further marginalisation.

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84. My thanks to Sue Lees and John Lea for allowing me to read their unpublished paper on the Sara Keays case.
85. See *Morning Star*, 25.3.86.
86. 'There must be something in every Socialist, from the very values involved in wanting socialism at all. . . that continually pulls towards precisely the compromises, the settlements, the getting through without too much trouble and suffering, that is the great resource of longing on which the capitalist parties draw. . . It is only when people get to the point of seeing that the price of the contradictions is yet more intolerable than the price of ending them that they acquire the nerve to go all the way through to a consistent socialist politics. . . I think it is above all this feeling which is holding a significant part of the British labour movement back—the hesitation of good people shrinking from the consequences of change.' Raymond Williams (1979), *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review* (London: Verso), p. 383.
87. *The New Statesman*, 2.1.60.