THATCHER & AFTER

MARGARET THATCHER AND HER AFTERLIFE IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

Edited by Louisa Hadley and Elizabeth Ho

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Edited by

Louisa Hadley and Elizabeth Ho

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Introduction

"The Lady's Not For Turning": New Cultural Perspectives on Thatcher and Thatcherism

Louisa Hadley and Elizabeth Ho

In 2003, a man frustrated with the state of affairs in Britain beheaded a marble statue of Margaret Thatcher. While sentencing, the judge announced his sympathy to the man's right to protest, but said that "the way you acted to knock the head off a politician who left power over ten years ago and whose party is no longer the party of government, was very much the wrong way" (2003 "Thatcher statue"). Four years later, another statue of Thatcher—a larger than life-sized bronze version—was erected in the House of Commons and attacked again, but this time by skeptical politicians claiming that "there are other PMs who played a much greater role in British life than Mrs. Thatcher" (2007 "MP's bid"). The violent act of decapitation coupled with the MPs' disavowal of the memory of Thatcher as a political force encapsulates the volatile contradictions that her image elicits and bespeaks the traumatic effects that the former prime minister continues to generate in the present.

Thatcher & After takes as its argument this contradictory and emotionally fraught response to Margaret Thatcher and Thatcherism and examines the former prime minister's continued influence on the British imagination more than 20 years after leaving office. The chapters in this collection restore to the present the conditions which provoked the anonymous man's rage and also examine the willed amnesia underlying the politicians' insistence on downplaying her "role" in shaping "British life" despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Both the man and the MPs' responses suggest a powerful crisis of memory in Britain surrounding Thatcher's absent presence. Their difficulties in assimilating Thatcher and her legacy suggest that "Thatcher" functions both *as* historical discourse and *outside* of historical discourse, where historical accuracy is "entangled" (1997, p. 5), to borrow from Marita Sturken, with British cultural memory of the 1980s.

Thatcher and the phenomenon of Thatcherism, we argue, function as a symbolic "wound" in the contemporary imagination, a palpable point where things can be said to have irrecoverably changed. The former prime minister's cultural and political policies cut violently across institutions as diverse as industry, communication, and the arts, in controversial, often devastating ways, forever altering Britain's postimperial identity at home and abroad. On the political level, she represented a "rupture" (Hall and Jaques 1983, p. 13) and an "irreversible break" (Corner and Harvey 1991, p. 1) from the Keynesian economic structures of postwar Britain. Consolidating Conservative power and a populist base of support, Thatcher essentially dismantled the Labor Party, trade unionism, and the efficacy of dissent represented by the Left. In their Marxist approach to Thatcherism, Jessop et al. lamented that the Left "did not really grasp the magnitude of the break … intended by Thatcherism" (Jessop et al. 1988, p. 23). Even for Conservative supporters ideologically suited to Thatcherism, the changes Thatcher wrought on Britain and the structure of the Conservative Party were "profound" (Evans 2004, p. 1). "Thatcher" as a persona and the effects of Thatcherism seem to be "unavailable to consciousness" and defy explanation or easy assimilation.

Cathy Caruth defines trauma as an event experienced "too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and [which] is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (1996, p. 4). Unlike a bodily wound, trauma generates an internal wound that is a "breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world" (1996, p. 4). The persistent reappearances of Thatcher in the present are certainly akin to traumatic flashbacks—she reappears unbidden in the most unlikely places: for example, in the form of a Halloween mask in the background of Billy Idol's dance scene in the movie *The Wedding Singer* (1998). The perceived "wound" left by Thatcher has generated a proliferation of texts in a range of genres attempting to measure the "magnitude of the break": political texts seeking to define the "Thatcher effect" vie with biographical works trying to capture Thatcher's charisma as an individual (more than 13 biographies have appeared since 2000), while cultural and literary texts imaginatively reconstruct the moment of Thatcherism making it available to a forgetful or nostalgic present. This escalation of textual material on Thatcher signals a culture of commemoration and commodification, but also its opposite, a profound cultural amnesia as to what the "magnitude of the break" actually was. For a post-Thatcherite generation there is nothing in the present to suggest, and little urgency to understand, that there was a "break" at all. As Francis Beckett, a historian who voted for Thatcher as the most effective

prime minister of the twentieth century writes, "today few people under 40 remember a time when trade unions were a real force in the land; when the public sector controlled large swathes of the economy; when local councils controlled education and other local services; when benefits were considered rights of citizenship" (2006 qtd. in "Thatcher and Attlee").

The invocation of the structures and vocabulary of "trauma" to express the memory of Thatcher and the history of Thatcherism provides us with a different narrative of contemporary British identity than Gilroy and Baucom's influential diagnoses of "postcolonial" (Gilroy 2004, p. 102) and "postimperial melancholia" (Baucom 1999, p. 176). The impetus of this volume is the need to remember and revisit the originary moment of rupture as its peculiar and persistent nature forms the basis of an "imagined community" (Anderson 1991, p. 6). At stake is an understanding of contemporary Britain as a community imagined around a wound. Analyzing contemporary British culture through the lens of Thatcher and Thatcherism as a trauma contests a cohesive national narrative but it also transforms Britain into a nation of "survivors" that in turn raises questions about agency, complicity, and ethics. Furthermore, the "traumatized" British present is positioned against a recent British past perceived to have been a pure, homogenous space of culture and habit irreparably damaged by 20 years of Thatcherism. This perception, then, colors any discussion of recovery from or alternatives to Thatcherism as an unproblematic and attractive return to that edenic space identified by Beckett, when "trade unions were a real force in the land; when the public sector controlled large swathes of the economy."

One common concern of all the contributors to *Thatcher & After* is a negotiation of this recovery and the possibility of subverting Thatcherite ideology and launching an effective countermovement against Thatcherism. The chapters in this volume trace the inventive, but also deeply compromised ways in which Thatcherism co-opted the possibility of resistance itself, harnessing and silencing all critique. By returning to sites of memory such as Number 10 Downing Street, the prime minister's official residence; to key moments of possibility such as the 1997 election of New Labour; and to the repetitive patterns of everyday life in best-selling books, television dramas, and reality TV shows our contributors perform acts of corrective recontextualization that allow us to recapture and reread the ways in which Thatcherism has been naturalized into national discourse and, as a consequence, forgotten. As a whole, *Thatcher & After* disturbs received notions of the past and intervenes in the ways in which Thatcher and Thatcherism form an obstacle in the "imagination of alternative futures" (Huyssen 2003, p. 2).

We present Margaret Thatcher as a powerful personality and an equally powerful obstacle that occludes and forecloses an engagement with the political and social conditions of Thatcherism that continue to affect the present. Thatcher's forceful personality provokes strong reactions: people either love her or loathe her. In 2002, she was voted 17th in the BBC poll to find the 100 Greatest Britons, and third in Channel 4's Worst Britons poll only a year later. Brian Walden sums up the polarity of opinion that Thatcher inspires, stating that she "would be the choice of friend and foe alike as a rigid and uncompromising upholder of Tory ideology" (2006). Thatcher crafted her own life-story to exemplify the social values she sought to instill through her government's policies. In speeches, biographies, and her own carefully crafted autobiographies, *The Downing Street Years* (1993) and *Path To Power* (1995), repeated emphasis was placed on Thatcher's roots as a "grocer's daughter" and her rise from Oxford scholarship girl to a Member of Parliament for Finchley (1958), Education Secretary (1970–4), Leader of the Conservative Party (1975), Prime Minister (1979–90), and Baroness Thatcher of Kesteven (1992). The narrative was unmistakably one of upward mobility, akin to the nineteenth-century *bildungsroman*, and was used as evidence that Britain was now controlled by meritocracy rather than aristocracy—a useful Conservative fiction. Thatcher often sought to identify herself with the electorate by reminding them that her values were those passed down by her Victorian grandmother and working-class father. Correspondingly, the domestic and financial security she received from her marriage to the wealthy Denis Thatcher in 1951 was played down. Mapped onto the nation, this narrative of Thatcher's life was particularly seductive to her electoral demographic.

Attacking or supporting Thatcher on the grounds of gender has been the most visible index of anxiety over her policies, an expression of the trauma we claim she represents. Thatcher herself declared that "she owed nothing to women's lib" (qtd. in Birch, McDermott and McNay n.d., p. 66) making her a problematic figure for male and female commentators alike. Admiration for Thatcher was expressed as gender blindness or equality while critiques of Thatcher by the Left appeared antifeminist or misogynistic. Depending on one's political affiliations, she was the monstrously bad mother, or "Thatcher the Snatcher," a name she gained when, as Secretary for Education, she abolished free milk for children over the age of seven. As Leader of the Opposition, she was nicknamed, more positively, the "Iron Lady" for her condemnation of the Soviet government and socialism. At the same time, Thatcher exploited her femininity and her class, claiming that her experience as a "grocer's daughter" and a "housewife" equipped

her for the role of prime minister, "I know what it's like having to live on a budget. I know what it's like having to cope" (qtd. in Birch et al., n.d. p. 12). When Thatcher was ousted from office, she cultivated a powerful myth of martyrdom: she was wounded femininity personified, betrayed by a male cabal thirsting for power and requiring the protection of her mostly male ministers. As one of Thatcher's confidantes recorded when she resigned, "my brave darling, my heart bled for her" (qtd. in Evans 2004, p. 121). The infamous *Spitting Image* (1984–96) puppet, a hideous latex-cast caricature of a cigar-smoking Thatcher in a man's suit, epitomizes this contradictory blending of male and female attributes and underscores the spectacle of Thatcher moving easily between various incarnations of femininity, depending on the current political advantage.[1]

While attempting to "fix" Thatcher on gender grounds monopolized public opinion of her during her time in office, her image has become increasingly "queered" after her career ended. In this collection, chapters by Kim Duff and Heather Joyce address Thatcher as a gay icon and the media images of Tony Blair in drag as Thatcher that plagued coverage of New Labour's 1997 election campaign. At a 2008 ceremony celebrating "Great Britons," Thatcher wore a gold suit that prompted viewers to liken her to "Britannia" (Fleming 2008) and cross-dressing artist Grayson Perry to appear in a leather dress and wig inspired by Thatcher. These new queer articulations of Thatcher can be read as an attempt to extricate her from strict gender binaries and make her available for new interpretation and consumption. The continued cultural investment in the imagination of "Thatcher" reveals an ambivalence about appropriate modes of recovery: responses are torn between the need to domesticate or defamiliarize Thatcher's controversial figure.

Although she is now silenced, Thatcher's current status is remarkably similar to Britain's beloved Queen "Mum" who passed away in 2002. As the benevolent, national grandmother figure, the suggestion is that Thatcher continues to nurture or guide "Thatcher's children"—the aphorism that describes an entire generation who has grown up knowing nothing but the aftermath of Thatcherite policies—and "Thatcher's grandchildren." These nostalgic and sympathetic responses to her risk closing down the potentialities of "queer" Thatcher and stalling any critical debate over the damage Thatcher caused to so many aspects of British life. As "Thatcher" has come to represent the cultural zeitgeist of 1980s Britain and indeed, Britain itself, the conditions—or the "-ism"—of her policies have been forgotten. As the traumatic effects of Thatcherism are transmuted into responses to Thatcher's persona, we argue that it is the symptom, Thatcher's *persona*, rather than the wound of her politics that is remembered.

Not surprisingly, Thatcher herself contributes to the collective amnesia surrounding her policies and political impact; in an address to a conference on herself at Hofstra University, she quipped, "I don't regard Thatcherism as an '-ism' … if I ever invented an ideology, that certainly wasn't my intention" (2003, p. 3). In disavowing her own "-ism," Thatcher presents Thatcherism not as an ideological approach but as a natural historical development. At its simplest, "Thatcherism" designates the development and evolution of the Conservative Party during the years that Thatcher was in power. After rising through the ranks of the Conservative Party, a young Margaret Thatcher confidently challenged a beleaguered Edward Heath for party leadership. In 1975 Thatcher became the first female leader of a major political party in the UK and moved on, almost inevitably, to become prime minister when the Tories defeated the ailing Labour Party in 1979. She led her party triumphantly through three general elections (1979, 1983, and 1987) and won two landslide victories before being ousted from power in 1990. Here, she is projected as an evolutionary inevitability, a view to which Thatcher herself adheres.

Thatcher's "revolutionary" policies, however, mean that she is as often positioned as an evolutionary anomaly. Thatcher was elected to office in 1979 under the strong mandate of reforming Britain's economy, turning the nation from the "sick man of Europe" ("Evaluating Thatcher's Legacy" 2004) who needed to be bailed out by the International Monetary Fund, to a strong, competitive, and modern nation. To some, she enacted the so-called Thatcher revolution that established and consolidated free enterprise, competition, and a robust market economy. To achieve this revolution, Thatcher severely curtailed government spending, sold off previously nationalized industries, and promoted an economy based on individual ownership and an "enterprise culture." Positioned in this contradictory way, "Thatcher" again prevents a critical engagement with the impact of her policies. Conversely, those who claim Thatcherism as an "ad hoc, ill thought-out and pragmatic set of policy initiatives" (Heffernan 2000, p. 36) risk missing the wound all together.

Several chapters in this volume understand Thatcherism as an economic or ideological doctrine aimed at consolidating monetarism and political control over the underprivileged. In Thatcher's first term alone, unemployment increased 141 percent to 3 million while Britain's industrial production fell by 10 percent and manufacturing by 17 percent (Proctor 2004, p. 97), numbers that suggest Britain in the early 1980s was in fact a developing rather than developed nation. Thatcher's desire to shift Britain from Keynesianism to monetarism—from a predominantly socialist welfare state to a society based on the individual, free-market,

and entrepreneurial spirit—required drastic reorganization. Ryan Trimm's chapter "Carving Up Value: The Tragicomic Thatcher Years in Jonathan Coe" probes the wound of this moment, described by Stuart Hall as "iron times" (Hall 1987, p. 19). In an attempt to turn Britain's economy around, Thatcher's strategies involved controlling government spending, a delicate balance between raising taxes and heavy cuts in public spending that affected all departments from housing to local government (Local Government Act, 1980). Under Thatcher, the National Health Service (NHS), the vanguard of the welfare state, abandoned free dental and health checks in 1987; higher education was particularly hard hit by cuts and the Education Reform Act in 1988 established a number of measures that made education more consumer-focused. In his analysis of Coe's novel *What a Carve Up!* (1994), Trimm likens these ruthless economic cuts to the violence of a "slasher" film to reveal the extent to which Thatcherism's economic policies ripped apart the social fabric of postwar Britain and to diagnose this moment as both a tragedy and a comedy.

Despite this rearrangement of economic priorities, the British economy was not particularly robust: unemployment remained high and the gap between rich and poor increased during Thatcher's tenure as prime minister. Patricia Holland and Georgia Eglezou's chapter takes on Thatcher's infamous phrase that there was "no such thing as society, only individual men and women" which signaled the end of social solidarity (and the need for a welfare system) and can be considered a marker in what David Harvey has termed the "neo-liberal turn" (2005, p. 9). Holland and Eglezou turn their attention to the ways in which broadcasting in the 1980s dramatized and naturalized the experience of cuts to the NHS. These cuts, they claim, redefined the concept of "public services" and the "public" sphere by transforming viewers and patients into "consumers in the private domain, rather than citizens in the public."

Implied in Trimm's and Holland and Eglezou's chapters is the demise of the political Left and the ideals and structures of social democracy cut by Thatcher and seemingly abandoned by New Labour in the present. Stuart Hall, one of Thatcherism's most outspoken and prolific critics, argues that the success or failure of Thatcherism cannot be measured in economic or electoral terms. Rather, "it should be judged in terms of its successes or failure in disorganizing the labour movement and progressive forces, in shifting the terms of political debate, in reorganizing the political terrain and in changing the balance of political forces in favour of capital and the right" (1983, p. 13). Thatcher's attack on the Left was nowhere more apparent than in her attitude toward the Trade Unions. For Thatcher, trade unions were the "enemy" of enterprise culture, "much