Introduction

People with other faiths and cultures have always been welcomed in this land, assured of equality under the law, of proper respect and of open friends. There is absolutely nothing incompatible between this and our desire to maintain the essence of our own identity.

_Margaret Thatcher, address to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, 22 May 1988_

AIDS starts with and comes mainly from homosexuals [and] spreads to others.

_Dame Jill Knight, House of Commons, 8 May 1987_

Every political era is remembered in terms of its defining myth, and Thatcherism is no exception. Both leftist critics and right-wing supporters tend to agree that Thatcherism made its mark in British history in terms of its economic policies. They point to the fact that both the Labour and Conservative Parties had more or less accepted a Keynesian approach to managing the economy in the post-war period. The mixed-economy model which juxtaposed private enterprise with the public ownership of key industries and welfare state programmes became the dominant framework for political debates and policy initiatives. Private capital and the labour movement were brought together in various capital-labour-state social contracts which secured labour discipline in exchange for a stable economy and full employment. There were of course some deviations from the pure consensus approach in actual government policies. After Labour experimented unsuccessfully with National Plans in the 1960s, the Conservatives made various ‘U-turns’ between free market and managed economy policies between 1970 and 1974.
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Although Labour returned to government with a strong interventionary and corporatist programme in October 1974, it introduced the first dramatic cuts to the welfare state and presided over a complete breakdown in state–trade union relations. The post-war ‘consensus’ model nevertheless obtained a bi-partisan hegemonic status to the extent that these policy shifts can be described as variations on a theme. From the economistic perspective which dominates the academic literature on British politics, Thatcherism’s radical departure from previous political regimes consists in its total rejection of the consensus model for an individualist, monetarist and free market approach to the economy. Standard accounts of the Thatcher governments (1979–90) therefore focus almost exclusively on economic policies: the massive cuts in government expenditure as a whole and public investment in roads, housing and the nationalized industries in particular; the privatization of nationalized industries, the de-regulation of business and the promotion of the sale of council housing; the shift to the management of the money supply rather than the management of aggregate demand; the weakening of the trade unions; the reduction in entitlements to social security benefits; and the introduction of taxation-cutting schemes. Some analysts do insist on the importance of Margaret Thatcher’s own personal leadership style and ‘statecraft’. Her views on social and moral issues, however, are generally regarded as less important than her positions on the economy. Thatcherite references to racist immigration controls, the British identity, the family, multiculturalism and morality – when they are noted at all by political analysts – are generally understood as marketing ploys which were used to sell the new economic policies. These references – so the story goes – amounted merely to superficial packaging: ‘bitter-tasting market economics [were] sweetened and rendered palatable by great creamy dollops of nationalistic custard’. Political analysts sometimes admit that Thatcher did have a utopian vision of the social, a vision of ‘a world in which small businesses could compete freely for the favours of the individual family consumer; [in which] the State keeps law and order, including the elements of a moral order to protect family decency, and provide succour for the genuinely unfortunate who cannot help themselves’. A distance, however, is usually introduced between this vision and her actual policies; she is seen as a pragmatic and ‘shrewd’ politician who ‘zigzag[ged] towards her goals’.

It is of course true that there are many important differences
between Thatcherism and other neo-conservative discourses such as Reaganism. Although both political projects were based on a pro-free market platform, there was a much closer articulation — although never a total fusion — between economic and moral positions in Reaganite discourse. British pro-family and anti-abortion lobbies have a complex relationship with the Conservative Party; not all prominent Conservatives are morally conservative, and not all members of these lobbies are Conservative voters. Whereas right-wing religious groups have had at most an ambiguous effect on British politics, they have become a key movement in the United States. It is now widely recognized in the United States that contestations around sexuality play an important role at all levels of the official political system. Debates around sexuality have become fundamental sites for the establishment of an American politician’s true conservative or progressive credentials. The official American political agenda – from the local government level to Presidential initiatives – includes struggles around access to abortion; sex education curricula in the schools; sexual harassment in the workplace; the censorship of pornography and lesbian and gay culture; the right to privacy; legislation which recognizes violence against lesbians, bisexuals and gays as ‘hate crimes’; the funding of AIDS research, the treatment of people with AIDS, and the regulation of HIV testing procedures; the restriction of sexist, racist and homophobic discourse on university campuses; the presence and conduct of lesbians, bisexuals and gays in the military; and legislation which protects sexual minorities from discrimination.

In contemporary British politics, sexuality appears to be a much less prominent issue. In the 1980s, political analysts emphasized only those aspects of the Thatcherite moral code which were explicitly linked with the legitimation of economic policies. Thatcher did, of course, make many statements on the relevance of Victorian family values to the construction of a free-market society. She often compared government expenditure to a well-managed household budget. For Thatcher, the welfare state’s promotion of a dependency culture and the interference in the free market on the part of the nationalized industries and trade union movement constituted the most serious threats to moral standards. Economic renewal, therefore, entailed a moral revolution: a return to individual responsibility, free market entrepreneurialism and British nationalism. She laid out her government’s economic policies in these terms in a 1979 post-election speech.
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The extent of our decline compared with other countries may show up most clearly in economic statistics. But that does not mean that the remedy lies only in economics. The mission of this Government is much more than the promotion of economic progress. It is to renew the spirit and solidarity of the nation... At the heart of a new mood in the nation must be a recovery of our self-confidence and our self-respect.\footnote{Thatcher explicitly recognized that Britain’s decline had taken place in a post-colonial context. She phrased her conception of the national ‘mission’ in suitably neo-imperial terms.}

It will not be given to this generation of our countrymen to create a great Empire. But it is given to us to demand an end to decline and to make a stand against what Churchill described as the ‘long dismal drawing tides of drift and surrender, of wrong measurements and feeble impulses’. Though less powerful than once we were, we have friends in every quarter of the globe, who will rejoice at our recovery, welcome the revival of our influence, and benefit from the message and from the example of our renewal.\footnote{Taking the Thatcherite discourse at its word – rather than examining its coded demonizations and the tremendous political effects of those demonizations – political analysts tend to view the moral agenda of the Thatcherites only in terms of this nationalistic economic ‘mission’ of recovery. Issues around sexuality were supposedly absent from the Thatcherite agenda. In his review of the Thatcherite policies dealing with the family, Willetts comments that it is ‘striking’ that the Thatcherites ‘avoid[ed] those areas of sexual behaviour which are the subject of so much prurient interest wherever people talk about morality or family values’. He notes that Thatcher and her Cabinet certainly did attack the ‘permissiveness’ of the 1960s, and recognizes that they linked the rise in criminality to socialist policies and the national decline. For Willetts, however, the Thatcherite attack on permissiveness remained a broad sweeping discourse which never dealt with the ‘prurient’ issue of homosexuality. He points out that the Thatcherites did not attempt to reverse the Labour Party’s liberalization of abortion legislation and de-criminalization of homosexuality – as if this fact constituted sufficient evidence that the Thatcherites had nothing to say about sexuality. He dismisses Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1987–8, which prohibited the promotion of homosexuality, as a ‘modest legal change’.\footnote{Willetts’ failure to examine the role of right-wing discourse on homosexuality is typical of virtually the entire literature on homosexuality.}}
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Thatcherism. Barring the odd scandal about cabinet ministers’ indiscretions and the break-up of royal marriages, sexuality is supposed to be totally irrelevant to official British political discourse.

With racism, the story is somewhat different, but ultimately arrives at the same conclusion. British political scientists readily admit that Enoch Powell’s racist campaign against black immigration played an important role in British politics in the late 1960s and early 1970s. But it is generally assumed that as the last major crisis around a new ‘wave’ of black immigration wound down in 1972 – the crisis about the entry of the Ugandan Asians – black immigration and race more or less disappeared from the political agenda. Thatcher herself made a notorious speech on black immigration in 1978, in which she pledged to respond to the natural concerns of the British about the ‘swamping’ of their country by people from the ‘New Commonwealth’ – a code phrase for blacks. The Conservative Party’s position in the opinion polls rose nine points directly after her speech.11 Her ‘swamping’ comments, however, are typically dismissed as an exceptional moment. Powell’s brand of nationalist racism is therefore quarantined in the political science literature in that it is represented as an isolated moment in the history of the Conservative Party. Racism, in short, is treated as if it were a very minor issue within Thatcherism.

I want to offer a radically different story. I do not promise to give an absolutely full account of all the socio-economic and cultural moments of British New Right discourse. Thatcherism, the most important variant of New Right discourse, is a particularly complex mixture of imagery, rhetoric and policies which was constantly re-defined in response to strategic circumstances throughout the three Thatcher governments. By focusing on race and sexuality, I am not claiming that racism and homophobia constitute the essence of Thatcherism and the British New Right in general, and that other socio-economic elements were irrelevant. To do so would be merely to reverse the essentialist erasures of the economic account. I aim instead to re-construct two strategic moments which were central to the legitimation of Thatcherism, and to show the ways in which discourse on race and sexuality were absolutely central to them. First, a historical moment: the right-wing populist break with the consensus tradition. The success of Thatcherism’s right-wing populist attack on collectivist and statist values cannot be explained purely in terms of the failures of the Wilson-Callaghan Labour government (1974–9). Hegemonic projects never emerge out of thin
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air; they always build on partially organized social groupings and popular ways of thinking. They especially target the social elements which have not been adequately represented within other political projects. Hegemonic strategies attempt to link or to articulate these elements together to form a new political bloc. The effectiveness of new articulations depends on two basic factors: the extent to which traditional articulations have become increasingly weakened so that social elements have entered a ‘crisis’ state of unfixity, and the extent to which the new articulations borrow from and re-work various traditional frameworks so that they already appear to be somewhat familiar.12

If we look back at the late 1960s, we can find substantial evidence that British voters had become increasingly likely to believe that they were not adequately represented within the existing two-party, consensus-oriented political system. (I shall discuss specific surveys and studies which deal with the rise of political alienation in the 1960s in chapter 4.) A right-wing populist movement did emerge at that time which spoke effectively to the concerns of many of the alienated and disenchanted. It offered a tremendously popular alternative to the consensus approach and, in this sense, laid some of the groundwork which was critical to the legitimation of Thatcherism’s right-wing populist project. The key point is that this movement, Enoch Powell’s anti-black immigration movement, was constructed around race and nationalism, rather than economic issues. Struggles around race – struggles around the very meaning of white-Britishness in a post-colonial world, struggles to protect the British borders against the black ‘invader’ from the former colonies – became the terrain for the most effective attack on the two major parties’ ‘business as usual’ approach to socio-economic issues. It was in response to Powell’s racist speeches that dock-workers and meat-porters marched on Parliament in an unprecedented show of solidarity with a Conservative MP. Thousands of people from virtually every part of the country – people who were unemployed, trade union members, teachers, managers and executives – wrote letters to Powell. They did not just say that they agreed with Powell on immigration. More importantly, they said that Powell was the only politician that they could trust. Powell spoke across class, partisan and regional divisions to bring the disenchanted together in a new populist bloc, and it was the specifically racist aspect of his movement’s banner which united his followers.

Every imperial centre faces a national identity crisis after it undergoes the trauma of decolonization and the disintegration of an
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imperial system; European nations, the United States and the former Soviet Union are all dealing with this profound problem. Populist movements such as Powell’s, which speak effectively to this post-colonial identity crisis, do not disappear overnight. While it is true that black immigration legislation never regained a prominent position on the British political agenda after the mid-1970s, and while it is true that Powell himself was confined to the parliamentary back benches after committing various strategic blunders in 1974, the Powellian legacy of guilt-free British nationalism – constructed through the exclusion of black otherness – became a powerful resource for Thatcherism.

However, Powell is usually regarded as a single-issue politician, and the impact of his racist movement tends to be narrowly measured in terms of actual immigration policies. There are a few notable exceptions to this tendency. Kavanagh, for example, describes Powell as an important right-wing challenger to the entire consensual tradition. He explicitly links economic policies to racial policies in his description of the ‘core issues’ in the consensus approach: ‘public ownership, welfare benefits for the undeserving poor, abolition of capital punishment, some practices of trade unions, decolonization … British membership [in] the European Community; and, perhaps above all, the belief that all British subjects (some 700 million) should have unrestricted entry to Britain’, 13Kavanagh’s central point is that opinion polls showed that there was no widespread support for the consensus; it constituted a ‘top-down’ discourse which was never successfully translated into a popular way of thinking. However, he privileges the appearance of a liberal immigration policy (let us, for a moment, put aside the fact that racial bias was introduced into British immigration legislation in 1962) as the most unpopular aspect of the consensus. He then proceeds to single out Powell’s anti-black immigration discourse as one of the most effective critiques of the consensus approach.

The importance of Enoch Powell’s speech about immigration in 1968 was that a senior ‘insider’ broke out of the high-mindedness of the consensus. For a brief period he was the most popular politician in the land. Powell used mass fears to attack elite attitudes – the classic populist strategy – and in so doing he showed that parts of the consensus rested on unsteady foundations. 14

Gamble takes a similar position on Powell’s significance. ‘Powell’s speech [on race relations and immigration, 20 April 1968] was of decisive importance in launching a new politics of the nation, and in
demonstrating the possibilities of a populist assault upon some of the central aspects of postwar social democracy.”15

Political analysts nevertheless tend to ignore this symbolic aspect of Powell’s intervention. For the most part, they treat race like an ‘issue’ rather than a nodal point. In other words, they take up the race = immigration equivalence which had been established in the 1960s, trace the rise and fall of popular concerns around immigration, and note the enactment of specific immigration legislation, but they do not look any further. Gamble, for example, recognizes that the ‘populist theme’ of race may have been important to the legitimation of Thatcherism, but claims that it ‘did not easily translate into positive government policies’. His test for the salience of race in official discourse is quite narrow: he points to the fact that although the Thatcher government did pass stricter immigration and citizenship laws, it did not respond to the right-wing calls for the ‘repatriation’ of black Britons to their countries of origin, and it did not attempt to repeal the existing race relations legislation.16 Race, however, cannot be adequately dealt with in this narrow manner. Layton-Henry and Rich argue that racial antagonisms were highly relevant to a wide range of public policy areas for the Thatcher governments in the 1980s, including urban programmes, policing, youth unemployment, local government—central government relations, housing and education. Some local governments also deployed anti-racist campaigns and affirmative action initiatives in the 1980s.17 Even at the level of public policy, race does not operate as an individual and isolated ‘issue’ in post-colonial Britain. Powell never treated black immigration as if it were a single ‘issue’ – and if he had done so, he probably never would have been such a prominent political figure. His campaign against immigration functioned as a ‘new politics of the nation’ precisely because he used racial antagonisms as a framework which could account for virtually every aspect of the national crisis. In Powellism, the relation between the white defenders of the true British nation and the anti-British black ‘invader’ became a nodal point: racial antagonism operated as the key which made the disintegration of the nation – and the inevitability of national recovery – intelligible.

Political scientists for the most part ignore interventions such as Layton-Henry’s and Rich’s text. However, this is not to say that they have not provided useful data on the role of race in the rise of Thatcherism. Kavanagh cites various surveys which show that in the late 1970s the electorate on average held positions well to the right of
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the two major parties on ‘issues like immigration, law and order, discipline and standards in the schools, capital punishment and trade unions’. It should, of course, be noted that by the late 1970s official discourse on immigration and law and order were structured extensively around racial antagonisms. The 1979 British Election Study included race relations as one of the eight key issues in the election. Crewe demonstrates that the Conservative Party’s perceived position on six of these issues was much more representative of both the views of the electorate as a whole, and of working-class voters in particular, than the Labour Party’s perceived position. These six issues were: unemployment policy, incomes policy, industrial relations law, social welfare benefits, nationalization and race relations. The 1979 British Election Study question on race relations asked the respondents to describe their responses to two alternative propositions: ‘the first thing to do about race relations is to put a stop to all further immigration’ and ‘the first thing to do about race relations is to tackle the problem of jobs and housing in the large cities’. The respondents’ answers were plotted on a seven-point continuum scale; full agreement with the first proposition would earn one point, indicating a far-right position, and full agreement with the second proposition would earn seven points, indicating a far-left position. The respondents’ perceptions of the Conservative Party’s and Labour Party’s positions were rated at approximately 2.75 and 4.8 respectively; working-class voters’ responses and the average response of the voters as a whole were rated at 3.1 and 3.5 respectively. Although the racist immigration laws of the 1960s and 1970s had been introduced by both Conservative and Labour governments, the voters nevertheless continued to associate the Labour Party with excessively ‘permissive’ policies on race. The perception of a gap between the two parties was therefore an important factor in the 1979 election.

Racial discourse in British politics, however, did not remain confined to debates around immigration. Race was re-coded through the 1970s and 1980s, concealed within euphemisms and tensions around crime waves, law and order, inner-city unrest, the revival of British ‘greatness’ in its victory over the Argentinians in the Falklands/Malvinas War, local governments’ affirmative action and contract compliance schemes, multiculturalism in local governments’ programmes and education curricula, competing versions of British imperial history, freedom of speech in the Salman Rushdie affair, and the re-settlement of Hong Kong’s elite in Britain. Indeed,
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the fact that race can be re-articulated at so many diverse sites of conflict is further evidence that race operates like a nodal point, rather than a single issue. Political scientists have for the most part failed to track these re-codings. Crewe, for example, notes the relative decline in popular concern around immigration in the 1980s. The respondents in a June 1983 BBC TV–Gallup survey were asked to list what they regarded as the most important issues in the 1983 election. Crewe comments, ‘immigration, the hidden mover of votes in the 1960s and 1970s, dropped to the bottom of the political agenda (1 per cent).’ He also recognizes that the popular image of Thatcher’s government as a ‘no-nonsense, determined and firm’ administration was a key element in its 1983 victory, and that its ‘uncompromising nationalism’ in the Falklands/Malvinas War contributed significantly to the creation of this image.20 Crewe does not, however, search for the genealogical precedents for Thatcher’s specific type of nationalist discourse which served her so well at the time of the Falklands/Malvinas War.

Riddell also argues that Thatcher’s personal image as a leader of conviction earned her tremendous respect, and that her reputation as a competent and decisive leader won her many votes even when her policies were disliked. Her government, of course, benefited from the divisions within the Opposition and from its own stimulation of small economic recoveries at key political moments. Riddell nevertheless ranks Thatcher’s own leadership style as a key factor in the Conservatives’ electoral success through the 1980s. Like Crewe, Riddell directly links Thatcher’s symbolic status as a decisive leader to the British Falklands/Malvinas War campaign. ‘The Falklands War will be remembered for the single-minded leadership of Mrs. Thatcher, which made her international reputation.’ In the sexist terms which are all too often used to describe extraordinary women leaders, Riddell comments that she is known internationally as the ‘Boadicea with a handbag’.21

Thatcher’s leadership symbolically represented the revival of Britain, and it makes sense that the Falklands/Malvinas War was the most important setting for this representation. The British handling of the dispute with the Argentinians over the Falklands/Malvinas actually constituted a moment of failed leadership and incompetence: the British had sold many arms to the Argentinian junta, a negotiated settlement in the form of a lease-back arrangement with the Argentinians was allowed to fail by Thatcher’s cabinet, cost-cutting reductions in British naval strength in the South Atlantic