

# Radical conservatism, or, the conservatism of radicals

Giddens, Blair and the politics of reaction

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The emergence of something which became known as 'Thatcherism' has caused no end of problems for writers on politics and the social sciences over the last two decades. One of the problems has centred on the radicalism of the phenomenon, since it is partly its radicalism which appeared to mark 'Thatcherism' out as a distinct form of conservative politics, or possibly even a 'new' Right way of thinking. Of the many reasons for which the New Right may deserve the label 'new' – for its self-conscious attempt to be more openly principled than previous forms of thinking on the Right perhaps, or merely by virtue of the very different historical circumstances in which it emerged – one of the most significant is the fact that it was more self-consciously radical than previous varieties of conservative thought. It is this radicalism, and the way others have attempted to understand it, that interests me, for it essentially destabilized the established political vocabulary.<sup>1</sup> This destabilization has proved highly demanding for social and political thinkers generally, and the Left in particular. For social and political theory it soon became clear that new ways of grasping the 'conservative' nature of the New Right were needed; for the Left the problem related to the kind of strategy to adopt in tackling it. This was particularly true of Britain, partly because 'Thatcherism' appeared to be the most intense manifestation of New Right politics and partly because of the spectacular failure of the Left in this country.<sup>2</sup>

In this article I shall argue that, although it might appear rather late in the day to be discussing the New Right, the central questions raised by New Right politics are still pertinent. The destabilization of the

established political vocabulary has resulted in a rethinking of what it means to talk of radical politics today. Much of this rethinking is of a decidedly reactionary nature, and, I shall claim, the policies of Tony Blair's New Labour are a continuation of this reactionary rethinking. I shall be taking a rather circuitous route, beginning and ending with Anthony Giddens's recent attempt to move social theory 'beyond Left and Right'. I argue that, although the New Right did indeed constitute a new form of radicalism which marked it off from traditional conservative thinking, the nature of this radicalism needs to be better understood. Like earlier forms of 'radical conservatism', the New Right is best seen as a form of reactionary modernism. This reveals the rethinking of the nature of 'radicalism' by social theorists such as Giddens as little more than a theoretical justification for the continuation of reactionary policies by New Labour.

## **Anthony Giddens and the 'radicalism' of contemporary conservatism**

Amidst the current fetish for 'ends' – of ideology, history, socialism, and so on – it is increasingly assumed that, compared with the intellectual and political morass in which the Left has found itself, the emphatic radicalism of recent conservative thought marks it out as the *only* form of radicalism left. This is expressed most explicitly by Anthony Giddens in his recent work. For Giddens, the historic conjuncture in which we live is a period in which the Left has become increasingly conservative just as conservatism has become increasingly radical. Giddens presents this simultaneous radicalizing of conservatism and declin-

ing radicalism of the Left as the grounds for a re-thinking of what it means to be 'radical' today. Since the most recent example of radicalism is given to us by conservatism, Giddens concludes that 'philosophic conservatism' (by which he means a philosophy of protection, conservation and solidarity) acquires a new relevance for political radicalism today, to the extent that *any* radical project must reconstitute itself by drawing on this tradition.<sup>3</sup> There is no contradiction in the Left becoming philosophic conservatives, Giddens tells us, because the context in which this new radicalism emerges is one in which the old dichotomies of Left and Right are dead. Thus 'we should all become conservatives now, but not in the conservative way.' 'The left', Giddens writes, 'were for modernization, a break with the past, promising a more equal and humane social order – and the right was against it, harking back to earlier regimes.... [T]oday, there is no such clear divide. It is not the need for a radical political programme that disappears ... [but] conservatism in the shape of neoconservatism and philosophic conservatism can be drawn on positively, if critically, to help shape such a programme.' And he suggests the new slogans: 'too conservative not to be radical' and 'too radical not to be conservative'.<sup>4</sup>

It is not insignificant that Giddens here reaches the political climax of an intellectual project started some years ago with his *Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*. Volume one of that critique was intended as the first of two volumes, the second of which was to be an argument 'Between Capitalism and Socialism'. The second volume turned into a discussion of the nation-state and violence and thus had to announce that it was the second of three volumes. *Beyond Left and Right* can thus be seen as the third volume of this critique.<sup>5</sup> That this critique should end with the introduction of a set of reactionary political concepts contributing to an ideological onslaught on working-class politics is an irony not to be missed.

The shifting language and politics in Giddens's work can be found in the writings of other sociologists on the Left, as well as political scientists who have struggled to grasp the radicalism of governments operating under the New Right banner. In their attempt at reconceiving the radicalism of the struggles of the past in *The Revolt Against Change*, for example, Trevor Blackwell and Jeremy Seabrook argue that resistances of the past can be understood as forms of conservatism – a desire to hold on to existing ways of life. The fact that radicals were often close to conservatives throws doubt on what it means to talk about being conservative and radical. The affinity between

popular conservatism and popular radicalism – for Blackwell and Seabrook even the most radical moment of transformation in Britain in the 1940s carried within it a profoundly conservative resistance to inflictions of capitalist society – makes it difficult to distinguish between them, as such a true radicalism is less a commitment to change and more a 'return to roots', an essentially conservative project to nourish the survival and growth of these roots. Hence the book's telling subtitle: *Towards a Conserving Radicalism*.<sup>6</sup>

For other writers the New Right appears radical enough to some to warrant the term 'revolutionary'. For this reason the term 'conservative revolution' has come into vogue as a way of describing the New Right and 'Thatcherism', whether at the heart of texts in political science or political journalism,<sup>7</sup> or as a passing reference in popular works of political economy,<sup>8</sup> or as a broad-brush approach to understanding the New Right.<sup>9</sup> One problem is that those who use the term soon discover that it is oxymoronic and thus shy away from saying what it actually means, or explaining why this oxymoron is the appropriate label for the phenomena in question. One of the most distinctive features of Adonis and Hames's edited collection *A Conservative Revolution?*, for example, is that there is in fact no entry for 'conservative revolution' in the index; neither is there an entry for 'revolution'. This seems a little odd, given the book's title, but only until one reads the contributions. For one soon discovers that the concepts 'conservative revolution' and 'revolution' barely make an appearance in the text itself. Only one of the contributors, Peter Riddell, uses the term 'conservative revolution', and then only once, in an article where he also refers to the conservative counter-revolution; the two concepts are not distinguished.<sup>10</sup> It takes another two hundred pages before the term appears again, in the editors' Conclusion; but just as the reader begins to think that the nature of a conservative revolution will be disclosed, the book ends, two pages later. In each of the chapters the question as to whether the Thatcher and Reagan governments constituted a conservative revolution, and thus how the neologism 'conservative revolution' can be explained, gets bypassed by that old favourite of political scientists, the comparative method. Most of the chapters are merely comparisons of the two regimes in terms of specific issues such as economic policy, party structures, the constitution, culture, and so on.<sup>11</sup> Just as political scientists faced with the oxymoronic nature of the concept 'conservative revolution' retreat to the safety of the comparative method, so sociologists who treat

conservatism as the new radicalism have tended to retreat to overgeneralized sociological musings.

This would not be that interesting were overgeneralized sociological musings as irrelevant and harmless as one would like, but sociology is often a far more politically charged discipline than some of its own practitioners claim. Giddens's work, for example, is highly influential in the Labour Party and on its intellectual fringes.<sup>12</sup> What is ultimately at stake in these debates is the nature of 'radical' politics in contemporary society and the terrain on which new forms of radicalism can be mapped out. But the increasingly common assumption that the real place of radical (or even revolutionary) politics is on the right fails to grasp where the radicalism of the New Right truly lies: namely, in its *reactionary* nature. By identifying where it truly lies we can more clearly see the danger behind the rethinking of the meaning of 'radicalism' by Giddens and others. To do this I shall briefly turn to an earlier group of 'radical conservatives'.

### A conservative revolution?

The idea that conservatism could be radical has been popular before. In Weimar Germany, for example, the term 'conservative revolution' became common in right-wing literary, intellectual and political circles. The conservative revolutionaries – including Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Edgar Jung, Hans Freyer, Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, Ernst Jünger, Oswald Spengler and Carl Schmitt – inevitably varied in their interests and concerns and thus never constituted an organized political group as such. But whatever differences existed between them, it is the similarities in their basic attitude that are crucial.<sup>13</sup> Edgar Jung defined the movement in the following terms:

By 'conservative revolution' we mean the return to respect for all those elementary laws and values without which the individual is alienated from nature and God.... In the place of equality comes the inner value of the individual; in the place of socialist convictions, the just integration of people into their place in a society of rank; in place of mechanical selection, the organic growth of leadership; in place of bureaucratic compulsion, the inner responsibility of genuine self-governance; in place of mass happiness, the rights of the personality formed by the nation.<sup>14</sup>

Similar formulations are found in the work of virtually all the conservative revolutionaries, for their central view was that the function of the new conservatism was to replace 'reason by faith, the individual by the community, disintegration by allegiance'.<sup>15</sup> The attack

on the atomistic conception of the individual, mechanistic conceptions of society and associated liberal values such as 'equality' was intimately connected with organicist and corporatist views of the nation, a stress on strong leadership and a demand for hierarchical social ranking. These arguments were articulated through a radical nationalism which rested on nebulous accounts of the national spirit – the revolution was to create a spiritual unity within the nation – to bring order to a fragmented social and political world.<sup>16</sup> Central to their self-perception as counter-movement to the Enlightenment generally and the 'spiritual upheaval' of the nineteenth century in particular was an aggressive opposition to liberal democracy and communism, both of which could be undermined by forthright arguments for the reassertion of the nation and national pride via a strengthening of state power against the competing groups and social forces within civil society. The language used by the conservative revolutionaries – the organic, rank, the nation – was essentially conservative, but the writers who considered themselves part of the movement believed that a society based on such values was to be achieved via revolutionary change.

What is meant by 'revolution' here? There are four points to be made. First, given their collective self-definition as anti-communist, the values driving such a revolution were to be formed in direct opposition to communist revolution, which, for the conservative revolutionaries, lacks 'spirit' and undermines the nation. The conservative revolution would thus be founded on the collective national spirit exhibited in 1914 and be brought about by those who would not stab the army in the back, give in to Germany's enemies or turn their back on German values and culture. That is, the revolution would be nationalist rather than communist. Brought about by an oppressed but nation-conscious *Volk* rather than an oppressed but class-conscious proletariat, the revolution would be an essentially spiritual revolution for the nation rather than a transformation of the material conditions of exploitation and the structures of social domination: a 'revolution from the right', as Hans Freyer called it.<sup>17</sup> Second, this meant a revolution against the political structures and social forces which appeared to facilitate the rise of communism and encourage the degeneration of the nation. A revolution, in other words, against the institutional structures of democracy and liberalism, both of which were embodied in the Weimar constitution. As such the conservative revolution was to restore the primacy of state power over competing forces within society, and undermine the

liberal ideas and institutions which opened the door to communism.<sup>18</sup> Third, those writers who used the term 'conservative revolution' did so precisely because of its seemingly contradictory meaning. As with other deliberately conjoined incongruous labels – 'National Bolshevism' or 'Prussian Socialism', for example – the conservative revolutionaries adopted such terminology partly to get away from traditional political labels. Possessing what Peter Gay has described as a 'perverse pleasure in paradox' combined with a 'deliberate, deadly assault on reason',<sup>19</sup> in their adoption of the language of revolution they also sought to



distance themselves from other forces on the political right which had illustrated their impotence by being either merely conservative or reactionary. Finally, the conservative revolutionaries were engaged in an attempt to win the concept of revolution away from the Left. Not only was it up to 'conservative man' to take over the revolution;<sup>20</sup> it was also up to 'conservative man' to win the *concept* of revolution for a new political vocabulary.

Does this brief outline of Weimar's conservative revolutionaries help us in understanding the New Right? Clearly, there are superficial similarities with the New Right project. The reassertion of national sovereignty by the New Right, and often the language in which the reassertion was made, sound disarmingly

like the way in which the original conservative revolutionaries wished to re-establish national pride. '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' was a common refrain of politicians associated with the New Right.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, the central concern of the New Right was the reassertion of the principle of private property alongside a simultaneous insistence on the need for a strong state authority – the free economy and the strong state, in Andrew Gamble's words. And, finally, one could compare the conservative New Right's attack on the hedonism and degeneration of the 1960s with the attack on Weimar decadence by the conservative revolutionaries at the time.

There are, however, aspects of the work of the conservative revolutionaries which make any attempt to transpose the concept 'conservative revolution' from the Weimar period to the 1970s and 1980s deeply problematical. First, conservative revolutionary writings were imbued with the vitalism and life-philosophy that had by then come to saturate political culture, especially on the Right. This saturation led the conservative revolutionaries to glorify the irrational and praise the will and instinct over reason. With Nietzsche as their 'patron saint',<sup>22</sup> the conservative revolutionaries had a philosophical underpinning completely alien to the new forms of political thought on the right which emerged in the 1970s. Second, while all of the conservative revolutionaries saw themselves as anti-communist, their relationship to socialism was far more nuanced, as some of them also took themselves to be defending a form of socialism. Moeller van den Bruck and Oswald Spengler, for example, used Nietzsche to develop a 'new' form of 'socialism' resting on a belief and struggle for the nation rather than on Marxist materialism. This was to be a 'German socialism', a 'socialism of the blood', a 'conservative socialism' – all synonyms for *national socialism* – with a corporate form adopted from the middle ages as the institutional structure for the unification of classes.<sup>23</sup> Whatever one might say about the New Right, none of those who defined themselves as part of the project ever claimed that they were engaged in some kind of socialist politics. Whereas it was politically expedient during Weimar for some on the Right to flirt with the language and liturgy of socialism in order to attract working-class support, undermine the Left and declare themselves as a genuinely new movement beyond Left and Right, New Right ideologues of the 1970s and 1980s had no such need. Indeed, they could claim that socialism, like communism, was a

dead force. This was because whereas the conservative revolutionaries of Weimar were often ambiguous about capitalism, the New Right were firmly committed to the principle of private property. This is related to the third important point of difference, which is that while both the conservative revolutionaries and the New Right despised communism and the working-class movement, for the former this was due to a well-founded fear of working-class revolutionary potential: October 1917 and the failed 1918 revolution in Germany were still fresh in their minds, and the continued strength of the KPD was crucial to German politics. In contrast, though the New Right despised communism and the working-class movement, its



central concern was that the working class had become 'unmanageable' rather than revolutionary.

Adopting the term 'conservative revolution' to grasp the radical nature of the New Right in the 1970s and 1980s simply won't do. The term fails to do the job expected of it, since neither 'conservative' nor 'revolution' really gets to grips with the exact nature of the radicalism of the New Right. Identifying the New Right as a form of *reactionary modernism*, however, allows us to see where its radicalism truly lies.

### Modernity, reaction, capitalism

Jeffrey Herf has argued that a number of conservative revolutionaries were committed to the same political goals as the forces on the Right generally – the destruction of Enlightenment reason and an end to both liberalism and communism – but did not reject modernity *per se* as many of the romantic anti-moderns did. Writers such as Ernst Jünger voiced all the demands common to thinkers on the Right – a demand for national unity via a revolution from the Right restoring state power and national greatness – but did

so not in conjunction with a wholehearted rejection of modernity and its trappings but in quite the opposite terms, that is, in conjunction with an embrace of one of modernity's key features, namely technology. These writers 'incorporated modern technology into the cultural system of modern German nationalism, without diminishing the latter's romantic and anti-rational aspects'. As such they were 'reactionary modernists': 'nationalists who turned the romantic anticapitalism of the German Right away from a backward-looking pastoralism, pointing instead to the outlines of a beautiful new order replacing the formless chaos due to capitalism in a united, technologically advanced nation'.<sup>24</sup> Herf's account is useful because it over-

comes many of the simplistic oppositions that have hitherto been assumed to exist, such as between mechanization and romanticism, modernization and tradition, and, most importantly, modernity and reaction. The term 'reactionary modernism' captures the ways in which the political right can be committed to at least some of the core features of modernity, yet simultaneously constitute itself as a reactionary force.

In Herf's account, however, the 'modernism' of reactionary modernism lies in its orientation to technology. Although he identifies two ways in which the reactionary modernists were modernists – in their commitment to technological modernization and in the way they articulated themes associated with the modernist vanguard such as the freeing of creative spirit, the triumph of the will, the aestheticization of politics and life – Herf tends to collapse the latter into the former, as the question of technology comes to dominate his account: what makes writers as diverse as Jünger, Spengler, Schmitt and Goebbels *reactionary modernists*, for Herf, is the conjunction of an essentially reactionary politics with a commitment to the new forms of technology generated by modernity.<sup>25</sup> But we can expand the meaning of 'reactionary modernism' beyond the question concerning technology in such a way as to allow us to grasp the nature of the radicalism found among other forces on the political Right. I shall develop this argument by first making a few points concerning the relationship between capitalism and modernity.

Although current thinking about modernity is divided along the main lines of the various social

science disciplines – where ‘modernization’ often refers to economic advance, especially technologically; ‘modern’ refers to a politico-historical transformation marking this epoch off from previous epochs; and ‘modernism’ refers to forms of artistic and cultural production<sup>26</sup> – in each case the modern is contrasted with the traditional and backward-looking. Modernization theory and modernism, for example, come together in the common ground between the former’s paradigmatic opposition of economic growth within an increasingly industrialized system to attitudes and structures seen as obstructive and irrational (that is, ‘pre-modern’), and modernism’s paradigmatic opposition of innovative forms of cultural and artistic production on the one hand and ‘traditional’ forms on the other. Central to the idea of growth or innovation is the presupposition of constant transformation: that at the heart of modernity is a continual reshaping of social relations, the fragmentary and fleeting dynamics of social life. As Marx and Engels note, modern social relations are distinguished by the perpetual transformation they are forced to undergo. This has a seriously dislocating effect on those who live these social relations.

Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.<sup>27</sup>

The social effects of a system in which stability means entropy are drastic, for the imperative to innovate and change produces continued social dislocation and disruption. This is captured better in the German ‘*Neuzeit*’ than in the English ‘modernity’. As Reinhart Koselleck has argued, during the nineteenth century historical writing shifted from the idea of *neue Zeit* to the composite concept *Neuzeit*.<sup>28</sup> One of the central features of the latter was that it was identified as a period of transition and perpetual transformation.

Everything has begun to move, or has been set in motion.... [E]verything is placed in question, doubted, and approaches a general transformation. The love of movement in itself, without purpose and without specific end, has emerged and developed out of the movement of the time.<sup>29</sup>

It is such dislocating effects of ‘modernity’ rather than its periodization that must be central to our understanding of the term: ‘Modernity is a qualitative, not a chronological category’, as Adorno puts it.<sup>30</sup> Many commentators have noted this, and it is partly for this reason that Charles Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin and Georg Simmel have become important in recent theories of modernity, given their interest in the fleeting, transitory and fragmentary process of modern social life. My point is that any account of modernity which focuses on such features must also recognize the importance of capitalism to the process of constant change. The passage from *The Communist Manifesto* cited above rests on the key insight that the source of the everlasting uncertainty and agitation that torments modern societies is the constant revolutionizing of production essential to the process of capital accumulation. Likewise the emergence of the concept of *Neuzeit* was founded on the widespread assumption that this new, modern time has industrial production as its foundation.

Now, the relationship between ‘capitalism’ and ‘modernity’ as concepts within the social sciences has been fraught with difficulties, one of the most significant of which has been the tendency to obliterate the question of capitalism from recent discussions of modernity. Indeed, the increasing shift of attention from ‘capitalism’ to ‘modernity’ in recent years has facilitated a decline in the status of ‘capitalism’ as a concept within the social sciences. Anthony Woodiwiss’s suggestion that we ‘compare the rapid increase in the number of index references to “modernity” with the equally rapid decline in the number of such references to “capitalism” in any book on social theory after, say, 1985’ is well made.<sup>31</sup> This shift has had serious consequences as it has tended to obliterate both the importance of capitalism to the experience of modernity and Marx and Engels’s central insight that capitalism is by definition a mode of production which rests on constant transformation. Reinstating the centrality of capitalism to our understanding of modernity makes it possible to argue that, since one of the key features of modernity is the constant revolutionizing of social relations as a result of their radical transformation under the auspices of capitalist socio-economic power, the *modernism* of reactionary modernism can be understood as a commitment to the kind of social relations established via the social power of the market, and not just a commitment to technology.

One can think of reactionary modernism as *reactionary* because in opposing the principles of 1789 and advocating nationalism as a third way between

communism and capitalism it simultaneously seeks to rehabilitate the language and ideals of past social forms such as the corporation or mythicizes pre-modern social practices. The point here is that the *radicalism* of reactionary modernism stems from the fact that it establishes as its guide for action a set of social forms which no longer exist, and perhaps never did, but which assume a mythic status and form the basis of emotional investment on a mass scale. Reactionary modernism is therefore 'modernist' in actively affirming the qualitative transformation in our social experience brought about by the socio-economic conditions of modernity, and 'reactionary' in the sense that what it seeks to retrieve is already lost and must therefore be created anew.<sup>32</sup>

The point being made here is that the radicalism of the New Right should be seen in this light.<sup>33</sup> Many have mistakenly assumed that the radicalism of the New Right project stemmed from the attempt at *modernizing* Western liberal democracies. In the British context this view holds that the Thatcher governments were radical because they played an important role in the modernization of British state and society. According to some, Britain failed to undergo a full and proper modernization despite being the 'first industrial nation'. Instead of developing a fully fledged industrial elite rooted in a bourgeois class with the appropriate market-oriented approach to capital accumulation, Britain had a bourgeoisie which aped the language, manners and general world-view of its aristocratic forebears. Instead of being a modernizing force, the British bourgeoisie accepted the mental climate of peaceful gradualism and accommodated itself to a system based on a hierarchy of social estates involving deference to a patrician elite based on personal (or quasi-personal) relations and modes of domination. From the 1832 Reform Act, when it failed to oust the aristocracy from power, through to imperial triumph and the incorporation of the working class, the British ruling class was aristocratic in its values and thus amateurish in its mode of governing both state and society. The result was supposedly the 'gentrification' of the industrialist and a 'gentlemanly capitalism'. Because of this British capitalism failed to become fully modernized: put simply, the industrial spirit and ethic of the market failed to oust a mental and cultural climate rooted in tradition. This argument has had many proponents from all sides of the political spectrum.<sup>34</sup> Most importantly, it is an argument adopted and disseminated by the New Right in its account of British stagnation. Witness Keith Joseph's claim in 1975 that one of Britain's problems was the

low prestige attached to industry, the origins of which stemmed 'from social causes, from anti-capitalist, anti-bourgeois prejudices which cannot be explained without reference to Britain's class structure and social history'. Because 'Britain never had a capitalist ruling class or a stable *haute bourgeoisie* ... capitalist or bourgeois values have never shaped thought and institutions as they have in some countries; instead, values which have originated in feudal times have persisted'.<sup>35</sup> The logic of this argument is that the New Right radically overturned this historical 'decline' by instilling the proper industrial and market spirit in the British people. It is this kind of 'modernization' which is said to make the New Right radical where conservatism had previously been non-radical.

That the New Right was radical in doing this can not be doubted. But this radicalism is best understood as a product not of a New Right commitment to the 'modernization' of liberal democratic states and societies, but of its essentially *reactionary* nature. The central elements of New Right politics combine in a politics of reaction: a reassertion of the principle of private property and capital accumulation as the *raison d'être* of modern society, alongside an authoritarian moralism using state power as a means of administering civil society. In Britain of the 1970s and 1980s, reaction meant a reaction against the so-called 'postwar consensus'. The radicalism here came from the attempt by the New Right to reverse the inroads made by the Labour movement into the intensity of capital accumulation (that is, to reassert the principle of a free economy) and to resist the demands made on the state by competing pressure groups and semi-private organizations (that is, to reassert the principle of a strong state). The New Right pitted itself against the existing order – the postwar 'consensus' regarding welfarism and the quasi-corporate management of capitalism – in the light of an account of past national glory, rooted in mythic images of *laissez-faire* capitalism.

### **Half echo of the past, half menace of the future**

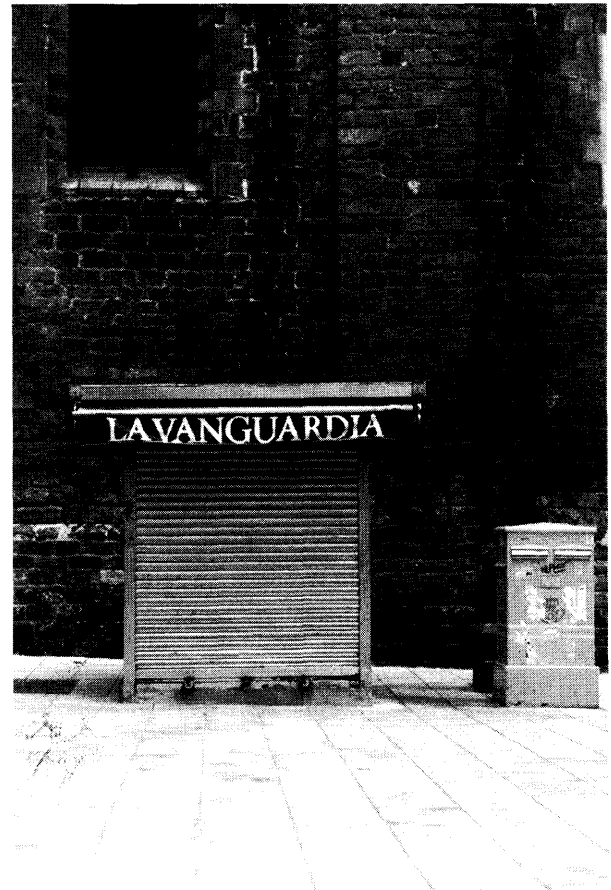
Identifying the radicalism of the New Right as a product of the movement's reactionary nature allows us to say what is distinctive about the New Right *vis-à-vis* conservative thought. To spell this out we need to distinguish between conservatism and reaction, though the two terms are frequently conflated. 'Conservatism' rests on the desire to maintain established practices and institutions combined with a commitment to private property and the market. But because any commitment to private property and the market

involves accepting the constant revolutionizing of the instruments and relations of production that this brings, conservatism is further defined by its desire to administer this constant change in a gradualist fashion. Conservatism is thus the political management of social change; this has included the management of the working class within the body politic, a point at which conservatism and most forms of socialism meet (in what Marx and Engels describe as 'conservative socialism'<sup>36</sup>).

While conservatism accepts a degree of social change in order to bolster the existing structures of power – 'a state without the means of change is without the means of its conservation' as Edmund Burke puts it – the defining characteristic of 'reactionary' is its desire to restore past social forms. Reaction sets its compass by the light of the past, by what it acknowledges to be no-longer existing social forms, but which it thinks can be somehow restored in the very different conditions of modernity. Holding up past forms of exploitation as somehow better than the present ones, the ultimate desire of reactionary politics is to restore certain socio-economic forms of production and exchange considered 'lost'. The crucial point, however, is that reactionary politics has a greater tendency to radicalism because the past forms which it cherishes are open to a far greater degree of idealization and thus tend to assume mythic status, a mythic status capable of generating mass support and which gives reaction a radicalism that is not present in conservatism. 'Half echo of the past, half menace of the future',<sup>37</sup> reaction sets itself against the existing order with a radicalism which can never be found in conservatism. It is this which gives the basis for 'revolution from the right' and which therefore appears, to some, to be a form of 'conservative revolution'.<sup>38</sup>

Distinguishing between reaction and conservatism in this way allows us to see why 'reactionary modernism' is more useful than 'conservative revolution' or 'radical conservatism' when grappling with the radicalism of the New Right. The key feature shared by the conservative revolutionaries of Weimar and the New Right (and fascism) is that they look both backwards and forwards. It is the mythicization of the past and the desire to restore lost social and political forms in a radically transformed future, combined with a commitment to the socio-economic forces of (capitalist) modernity, which gives these movements their radicalism. It is for these reasons that the attempt by social theorists to become 'radical' by aping some of the arguments in recent political thought on the Right is politically dangerous.<sup>39</sup>

Given the reactionary roots of Right radicalism, to argue for the radicalism of conservatism is in fact to open the door to the claim that it is only through a politics of reaction that we can make any difference. This is best understood in the light of the conjunction between Giddens's rethinking of the nature of radicalism and the Labour administration under Tony Blair. Junking any talk of socialism, New Labour came to power in Britain talking of *modernization* as the basic condition of government.<sup>40</sup> The assumption has been that the radicalism of the modernizing nature of the



New Right project can be sustained while its politics can be ditched in favour of something a little more 'progressive'. This is an assumption held not only by those in the party but also by many of its intellectual gurus: Giddens, for example, treats modernization as a basic presupposition of his rethinking of radical politics.<sup>41</sup> But it should now be clear that the radicalism of the New Right cannot be dissociated from its reactionary neo-liberal stress on markets and idealization of nineteenth-century capitalist property relations. In the context of revived practices of capital accumulation combined with the crushing defeats inflicted on organized labour in the 1980s, and bereft of anti-capitalist arguments with which to flesh out an alternative vision of modernization, the Blair regime can only ape the principles and thus the policies of the



New Right. The decision by the Blair government to adhere to the spending plans initiated by the Tories under Major and the trade-union reforms set in place during the 1980s are not pragmatic fiscal and political decisions, as some have generously argued, but a natural outcome of seeking to continue the modernizing project found within the New Right. The Labour government's vision of modernization is identical to that of the New Right: an essentially reactionary project based on a reassertion of the principle of private property.<sup>42</sup> And it is notable that Giddens's argument for the modernization of welfare is based on criticisms of the welfare state from the Right rather than the Left: 'recognizing the problematic history of the welfare state, third way politics should accept some of the criticisms the right makes of that state.'<sup>43</sup>

In this context the attempt to rethink 'radical' politics by naively positing the 'emancipatory' nature of political thought on the Right reveals itself to be merely a rationalization of New Labour's shift even further away from anything remotely approaching a materialist or class-based politics.<sup>44</sup> Giddens's approach to poverty, for example, is stripped of any sense that it is a product of material social relations or constituted by class domination and exploitation. As such his 'radical' solution is to suggest a new 'pact' between the affluent and the poor, an 'effort bargain' founded on lifestyle change designed to foster the autotelic self. Too radical not to be conservative indeed, this rethinking of radicalism leaves lifestyle changes as the only form of political action. Where this fails, the victims of poverty are to be given emotional rather than financial support: 'counselling, for example, might sometimes be more helpful than direct economic support'.<sup>45</sup> Having finally abandoned Marxism, Giddens ends his long-drawn-out critique of historical materialism by jettisoning socialist politics altogether. Unsurprising, then, to find his work forming part of the theoretical cover for Blair's neo-liberal post-socialist appropriation of the term 'radical' and espousal of a third way between capitalism and socialism. Easily transformed into policy, Giddens's contribution to contemporary 'radicalism' constitutes an ideological underpinning of New Labour's continuation of the attack on the working class originally set in motion by the reactionary modernism of the New Right and first put into practice by the Tories. To put it in straightforward political terms: far from being a rethinking of radical politics, the Giddens-Blair approach constitutes the main ideological bulwark against a genuine emancipatory alternative.

The Left may be in as big a mess as many have suggested, and a thorough rethinking of some of its central terms may not be amiss. But neither the New Right nor old conservatism provide the grounds for this rethinking. The radicalism of the New Right is clearly of and for the Right. To forget this in the belief that we are somehow 'beyond Left and Right' (and it is worth remembering the reactionary heritage of that phrase too) is to encourage us to become at best 'conservative socialists' who, as Marx and Engels recognized, are first and foremost against the possibility of working-class emancipation. In supposedly emancipating us from the obsolescent politics of the Left, this actually only serves to open the door to more extreme forces of reaction.

## Notes

1. Peter Osborne, 'Times (Modern), Modernity (Conservative)? Notes on the Persistence of a Temporal Motif', *New Formations* 28, 1996, p. 134.
2. Hence the plethora of books from the early 1980s onwards trying to grasp the nature of 'Thatcherism'. For interpretations of Thatcherism as, variously, authoritarian populism, a reassertion of the 'free economy and strong state', an alliance of disparate forces around a self-contradictory programme that emerged from the dual crisis of the British state, and a mirage created largely by the Left see, respectively, Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques, eds, *The Politics of Thatcherism*, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1983; Andrew Gamble, *The Free Economy and the Strong State: The Politics of Thatcherism*, Macmillan, London, 1988; Bob Jessop, Kevin Bonnett, Simon Bromley and Tom Ling, *Thatcherism*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1988; Paul Hirst, *After Thatcher*, Collins, London, 1989. I shall be discussing the New Right rather than 'Thatcherism', for while there are good grounds for discussing the former – the emergence of intellectually astute arguments for a reassertion of right-wing politics in the context of a new historical conjuncture – the grounds for discussing 'Thatcherism' are much weaker. 'Thatcherism', it seems to me, was an invention of some sections of the British Left, puzzled by their own historical failings and far too keen to supplicate themselves before what they thought were wide-scale changes brought about in British society by the election of a Conservative Party under the rule of one particular leader.
3. Anthony Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right: The Future of Radical Politics*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1994, pp. 2, 10, 12; 'Brave New World: The New Context of Politics', in David Miliband, ed. *Reinventing the Left*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1994, p. 27; *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1998, pp. 67–8, 120; 'The Future of the Welfare State', in Michael Novak, *Is There a Third Way? Essays on the Changing Direction of Socialist Thought*, IEA, London, 1998, p. 28.
4. Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right*, p. 49. Precisely which institutions of power Giddens intends challenging with these slogans he fails to tell us.
5. Anthony Giddens, *A Contemporary Critique of*

- Historical Materialism, Volume 1: Power, Property and the State*, Macmillan, London, 1981, pp. 1, 247–8; *The Nation-State and Violence: Volume Two of A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1985, p. 1; *Beyond Left and Right*, Preface.
6. Trevor Blackwell and Jeremy Seabrook, *The Revolt Against Change: Towards a Conserving Radicalism*, Vintage Books, London, 1993, pp. 54–8.
  7. Andrew Adonis and Tim Hames, eds, *A Conservative Revolution? The Thatcher–Reagan Decade in Perspective*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1994. See also Peter Jenkins, *Mrs Thatcher's Revolution: The Ending of the Socialist Era*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1987, p. 373; Peter Jenkins, 'Reflections on the Thatcher Revolution', *The Independent*, 3 and 4 May 1989; Shirley Robin Letwin, *The Anatomy of Thatcherism*, Fontana, London, 1992, pp. 41, 332.
  8. Will Hutton, *The State We're In*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1995, p. 82. Compare his use of 'counter-revolution' at p. 112 and his description of the New Right as revolutionary at p. 165.
  9. Simon Gunn, *Revolution of the Right: Europe's New Conservatives*, Pluto Press, London, 1989.
  10. Peter Riddell, 'Ideology in Practice', in Adonis and Hames, eds, *A Conservative Revolution?*, pp. 19, 32.
  11. Having reached the end of the book without any kind of understanding of the term 'conservative revolution', the editors nonetheless conclude that the Thatcher and Reagan regimes did not constitute conservative revolutions (adding the bizarre claim that the two regimes were in fact *coups d'état*). Andrew Adonis and Tim Hames, 'Conclusion', in Adonis and Hames, eds, *A Conservative Revolution?*, p. 251.
  12. See, for example, the debates in Miliband, ed., *Re-inventing the Left*. Giddens's 'Brave New World' provides the opening chapter of this book, and in his 'Introduction' Miliband states that Giddens's chapter provides 'the foundations for the analytical work pursued throughout the book' (p. 5). Among the other contributors are Gordon Brown, Will Hutton, David Marquand and Patricia Hewitt. Miliband himself is now Director of the Policy Unit at No. 10.
  13. Keith Bullivant, 'The Conservative Revolution', in Anthony Phelan, ed., *The Weimar Dilemma: Intellectuals in the Weimar Republic*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1985, p. 52; Göran Dahl, 'Will "The Other God" Fail Again? On the Possible Return of the Conservative Revolution', *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1996, pp. 25–50, 28.
  14. Edgar J. Jung, 'Germany and the Conservative Revolution' (1932), in Anton Kaes, Martin Jay and Edward Dimendberg, eds, *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1994, pp. 352–4. See also Larry Eugene Jones, 'Edgar Julius Jung: The Conservative Revolution in Theory and Practice', *Central European History*, vol. 21, no. 2, 1988, pp. 142–74.
  15. Moeller van den Bruck, *Das Dritte Reich* (1923), cited in Klemens von Klemperer, *Germany's New Conservatism: Its History and Dilemma in the Twentieth Century*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 1968, p. 164.
  16. Hugo von Hofmannsthal, 'Literature as the Spiritual Space of the Nation' (1927), in Kaes et al., eds, *Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, p. 341.
  17. See Hans Freyer, 'Revolution From the Right' (1931), in Kaes et al., eds, *Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, p. 347. For a discussion of Freyer's importance see Jerry Z. Muller, *The Other God that Failed: Hans Freyer and the Deradicalization of German Conservatism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 1987, esp. chs 6 and 7.
  18. See Carl Schmitt's critique of liberalism and the Weimar constitution in *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab, Rutgers University Press, New Jersey, 1976, and *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, trans. Ellen Kennedy, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1985. On the political impetus behind this critique, see Mark Neocleous, 'Friend or Enemy? Reading Schmitt Politically', *Radical Philosophy* 79, September/October 1996, pp. 13–23.
  19. Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1974, p. 84. More generally, see Walter Struve, *Elites Against Democracy: Leadership Ideals in Bourgeois Political Thought in Germany, 1890–1933*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 1973.
  20. Klemperer, *Germany's New Conservatism*, p. 161.
  21. Margaret Thatcher, Conservative Political Centre Summer School, Cambridge, 6 July 1979, cited in Peter Riddell, *The Thatcher Government*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1985, p. 1.
  22. Klemperer, *Germany's New Conservatism*, p. 39.
  23. Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1974, p. 243; Klemperer, *Germany's New Conservatism*, pp. 56–9, 78–9, 158, 165–7, 175–7; Roger Woods, *The Conservative Revolution in the Weimar Republic*, Macmillan, London, 1996, pp. 62–71.
  24. Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1984, p. 2.
  25. Herf, *Reactionary Modernism*, p. 12. The same collapsing takes place in David E. Cooper, 'Modern Mythology: The Case of "Reactionary Modernism"', *History of the Human Sciences*, vol. 9, no. 2, 1996, pp. 25–37.
  26. For similar formulations of this see Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, Verso, London, 1983, p. 88; and Alice Yaeger Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality: Fascism, Literature, and French Intellectual Life*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1986, p. 25.
  27. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 6, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1976, p. 487.
  28. Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1985, pp. 233, 251–2, 257.
  29. F. Ancillon, writing in 1828, cited in Koselleck, *Futures Past*, p. 251.
  30. Theodore Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott, Verso, London, 1978, p. 218.
  31. Anthony Woodiwiss, 'Against Modernity: A Dissident Rant', *Economy and Society*, vol. 26, no. 1, 1997, pp. 1–21 n. 2. Woodiwiss points out how Marx has been criticized for equating modernity with capitalism when it is patently clear that Marx's intention was to discuss capitalism and not something called 'modernity'. On this

- point, see also Ellen Meiksins Wood, 'Modernity, Post-modernity, or Capitalism', *Monthly Review*, vol. 48, no. 3, 1996, pp. 21–39.
32. Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde*, Verso, London, 1995, p. 164. In this sense fascism is a prime example of reactionary modernism, as I have argued elsewhere. Mark Neocleous, *Fascism*, Open University Press, London, 1997, ch. 4.
  33. See Osborne, 'Times (Modern), Modernity (Conservative)?', p. 135. I tentatively followed this argument through in the conclusion to *Fascism*.
  34. I am not doing justice to the subtlety of some of the variations in the arguments. A sense of Perry Anderson's and Tom Nairn's contributions can be got from Perry Anderson, *English Questions*, Verso, London, 1992, and Tom Nairn, *The Break-up of Britain*, Verso, London, 1981. For other accounts see Stanley Rothman, 'Modernity and Tradition in Britain', in Richard Rose, ed., *Studies in British Politics*, Macmillan, London, 1969; Martin Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit 1850–1980*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1985; W.D. Rubinstein, *Capitalism, Culture and Decline in Britain, 1750–1990*, Routledge, London, 1993. I have criticized the way this creates a misleading picture of the capitalist state, in *Administering Civil Society: Towards a Theory of State Power*, Macmillan, London, 1996, pp. 92–8.
  35. Keith Joseph, 'Is Beckerman Among the Sociologists?', *New Statesman*, 18 April 1975, pp. 501–2.
  36. Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, pp. 513–14.
  37. *Ibid.*, p. 494.
  38. Osborne, 'Times (Modern), Modernity (Conservative)?', p. 137. This is the basis of Marx and Engels's distinction between conservative and reactionary socialism in *The Communist Manifesto*. For a discussion, see Mark Neocleous, 'Revolution? Reaction? Revolutionary Reaction?', in Mark Cowling, ed., *The Communist Manifesto: New Interpretations*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 1998.
  39. In passing, one should also note the way that Giddens dangerously misunderstands the nature of Roger Scruton's conservatism. After claiming that philosophic conservatism acquires a relevance for political radicalism today, Giddens then uses Scruton's work to flesh out precisely what philosophic conservatism is, in the process claiming that 'Scruton accepts the importance of democracy, but only with some reluctance and hedging around' (Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right*, pp. 10, 29). This is nonsense. For Scruton 'no conservative ... is likely to think that democracy is the central axiom of his politics' because democracy is a 'contagion'. It is a contagion because it breaks with fundamental principles on which order is based. Roger Scruton, *The Meaning of Conservatism*, Macmillan, London, 1984, pp. 53, 58–9, 91.
  40. See, for example, Blair's speech to the first Labour Party Conference after winning power in 1997, in which modernization was a key theme and 'modern' a central part of the rhetoric, and his speech to the 1998 Conference in which modernization was presented as one of the key terms of the Third Way. Moreover, Blair has now expanded this notion to the point where the policy of modernization is taken to apply equally to China as well as Britain. See Michael White, 'Blair Finds Ally for His Third Way in the Heart of China', *Guardian*, 7 October 1998.
  41. Giddens, *Third Way*, pp. 67–8, 73.
  42. And while some have noted Blair's use of conservative language in which to express this vision – the defence of the nation being the most obvious – it is in fact his appropriation of the ideas of forces further to the right that expresses the ultimately reactionary nature of this vision. Witness his palingenetic myth of a new Britain: 'Today a new Labour Party is being born. Our task is nothing less than the rebirth of our nation. A new Britain. National renewal ... New Labour being born. The task of building a new Britain now to come.' Tony Blair, speech to the Labour Party, April 1995. For the role of palingenetic myth in fascism, see Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, Routledge, London, 1993. For Blair's defence of the nation, see his speech to the 1997 Party Conference, in which he referred to 'Britain' or 'British' 53 times, 'the nation' 19 times, and 'the country' 31 times. For his stress on Labour as the One Nation party, see his speech to the 1995 Party Conference.
  43. Giddens, *Third Way*, p. 112.
  44. See Michael Rustin, 'The Future of Post-Socialism', *Radical Philosophy* 74, November/December 1995, pp. 17–27, 21.
  45. Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right*, p. 194; 'Brave New World', p. 30; *Third Way*, p. 117.

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