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The 1960s and the Rise of Thatcherism¹

Takashi KOSEKI²

ABSTRACT: Thatcherism is commonly regarded as a project in the economic and political context of the 1970s. The so-called ‘crisis’ of the seventies has been identified as the main factor promoting its upsurge and ultimate hegemony. However, the ‘crisis’ of the seventies was skillfully constructed and overstated by using ideological frames. It is too naïve to accept such conveniently propagated and often historically inaccurate ‘crisis’ at face value. The 1960s, rather than the 1970s, was crucial for the shaping and rise of Thatcherism. Firstly, the affluence and mass consumerism of the decade, together with the cultural revolution, forged a much more individualistic public that tended to be receptive to the Thatcherite vision of popular capitalism. Secondly, the emergence of the permissive society made possible the political ascent of a married female politician from a provincial lower middle-class Methodist family. Last, the spread of moralist reactions to the perceived excess of permissiveness was utilized by Thatcher, who portrayed herself as a defender of traditional values and virtues. Although she often voiced her critical assessment of the sixties, the decade created favourable conditions that could be exploited and capitalized on by her and her allies.

KEYWORDS: Thatcherism, affluence, mass consumerism, permissive society, moralism

1. Introduction: The 1970s or the 1960s?

This article attempts to examine the rise of Thatcherism from a historical perspective, with special reference to the 1960s and its aftermath. Thatcherism is commonly regarded as a project in the economic and political context of the 1970s, particularly that of industrial militancy and stagflation. The so-called ‘crisis’ of the seventies has been identified as

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² Takashi Koseki is Professor of the Institute for Research in Humanities, Kyoto University.
E-mail: koseki.takashi.3a@kyoto-u.ac.jp

the main factor promoting its upsurge and ultimate hegemony. From this perspective, Margaret Thatcher was considered a sort of saviour of the country who descended at the eleventh hour. The Conservative Party, under her leadership, positioned itself as the one and only plausible alternative to the Labour Party, which exposed its inability to govern the country. After winning the 1979 general election, she implemented drastic measures to regenerate the seemingly moribund and ungovernable Britain. The legend of the Thatcherite redemption is still quite influential.

However, as it has been made known, the 'crisis' of the seventies was skillfully constructed and overstated by using ideological frames. The shrewd construction, narration, and dissemination of the 'crisis', which seemed to prove the inevitable failure of social democracy, made the Thatcherite neoliberal prescriptions politically possible and even convincing. It is too naïve to accept such conveniently propagated and often historically inaccurate 'crisis' at face value.

In recent years, the reassessment of the 1970s has rigorously been carried out and its common assumption as a dismal and benighted decade of 'crisis' and 'decline' has gradually been overturned. A complete reinterpretation of the seventies is certainly an acute and urgent concern for historians. Although the dominant chronology of post-war Britain that divides it into three periods: first, the Keynesian social democratic 'consensus'; second, the 'crisis' of the seventies; and, finally, the triumph of neoliberalism; remains fairly well entrenched, we should be cautious not to simply identify the seventies as the most pivotal decade in the whole post-war period.

Let us go back further and look at another, no less significant decade, the 1960s, when the cultural revolution discredited the long-accepted cultural hierarchy, the permissive society emerged, individualism soared and mass consumerism became triumphant.

This article's hypothesis is that the 1960s, rather than the 1970s, was crucial for the shaping and rise of Thatcherism. Although Thatcher often voiced her critical assessment of the sixties, the decade not only left a negative legacies to be overcome but also created favourable conditions that she could exploit and capitalize on. There are three tentative explanations for this.

- (i) The affluence and mass consumerism of the 1960s, together with the cultural revolution, forged a much more individualistic public that tended to be receptive to the Thatcherite vision of popular capitalism.
- (ii) The permeation of permissiveness made possible the political ascent of Thatcher, a married female politician from a provincial lower middle-class Methodist family.
- (iii) The spread of moralist reactions to the perceived excess of the permissive society was cleverly utilized by Thatcher, who portrayed herself as a defender of traditional values and virtues.

2. The Emergence of Individualistic Consumers: Explanation (i)

The 'rise of individualism', which was driven, above all, by the advent of an affluent society, is one of the most frequently emphasised historical trends in the standard accounts of the latter half of Britain's twentieth-century. In addition to the expansion of affluence, the rise of individualistic attitudes should be explained by multiple social and cultural developments in the post-war Britain. Some of these include the relative economic and social security, based upon the state welfare measures and near-full employment, the end of military service, secularisation (if not the 'death of Christian Britain'), expansion of education and homeownership, and the breakdown of traditional communities and suburbanisation. Moreover, the cultural revolution of the sixties, which cherished and emphasised to be original and different from others, was certainly one of the main factors contributing to the growth of individualism.

Another remarkable phenomenon caused by affluence was an upsurge in mass consumerism. Even the working-class people became able to afford and consume mass-produced goods and came to identify themselves more as consumers than workers. For such consumers, the goods they purchased became the primary mediums for expressing their individuality and personality. The records or clothes they possessed eloquently showed what kind of persons they were and how distinctive their tastes were. In this sense, mass consumerism did much to make society more individualistic.

In such an individualistic society, collective identities, most notably those of class, were not as decisively important as before. As an increasing number of working people acquired mixed class characteristics, their class identities became somewhat fragile. The cross-class youth culture is an obvious example of this phenomenon. Although the rise of individualism did not necessarily bring about the decline of class distinctions, it cannot be denied that the boundaries between classes, especially that between the middle- and working-classes, blurred. Class allegiance was no longer reliable enough.

Thatcher and her allies correctly perceived such a transfiguration of the class society and tried to appeal to those who were resistant to being identified as part of a particular class by propagating an 'anti-class' rhetoric that stressed the 'classlessness' of British society. The popular discourses of classlessness argued that affluent workers were coming closer to 'bourgeois'. In 1978, Thatcher herself asserted that 'divisions into class' had become 'outmoded and meaningless'. Her discursive strategy to obtain larger audience was to rail against the bureaucratic state welfare, which supposedly suppressed the individuality of the people, and to celebrate freedom of choice and meritocracy. This strategy proved to be more effective than that of the New Left, who attributed the 'Great Apathy' (E.P. Thompson) among the people to the complacent affluence and the evils of consumption.

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Needless to say, individualism cannot be equated with selfishness, greed, or materialistic tendencies. The essence of individualism is the desire for greater self-determination, expression and fulfillment, which did not automatically lead in a straight line to Thatcherism. There were other possible paths. That being said, nevertheless, the fact that Thatcher and her colleagues quite skillfully capitalized on the rise of individualism and derived many benefits from it seems beyond question. Their stock phrase, ‘the right to be unequal and the freedom to be different’, struck a chord especially with the baby-boomer generation. Thatcher declared in 1975: ‘one of the reasons that we value individuals is not because they’re all the same, but because they’re all different.’

Feminist historian Sheila Rowbotham’s fun to read memoir of the 1960s, *Promise of a Dream* (2000), suggested that the experience of the sixties nourished the making and ultimate hegemony of Thatcherism.

Ironically, openings created by social movements were to present market opportunities – the slogans transmogrified into designer labels and some quick-footed ‘alternative’ capitalists emerged from the mêlée. Yet the radical dream of the sixties was to be stillborn, for we were not to move towards the cooperative egalitarian society we had imagined. Instead the sixties ushered in an order which was *more* competitive and less equal than the one we had protested against.

... our hopes have been appropriated, our aspirations twisted.

One of the best books ever written about the Beatles, Ian MacDonald’s *Revolution in the Head* (1994, 2008), also argued that Thatcher and her allies were the most direct beneficiaries of the legacy of the sixties.

She and her radicalized, post-consensus Conservative voters are the true heirs of the Sixties. *They* changed the world, not the hippies (and certainly not the New Left). What mass society unconsciously began in the Sixties, Thatcher and Reagan raised to the level of ideology in the Eighties: the complete materialistic individualisation – and total fragmentation – of Western society.

Novelist Jenny Diski’s reflections on the 1960s (*The Sixties*, 2009) expressed a tone of self-criticism for buying into Thatcher’s rhetoric.

She was anathema to us, the very opposite of what we had hoped for the future, but perhaps our own careless thinking gave the radical individualism of her government at least rhetorical foothold. Her founding statement that “There is no such thing as society” could easily be derived from the “self at the centre” that seemed to many of us in the Sixties so unproblematical.

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We do have some responsibility there, I think,

...

... we were guilty, too, of failing to understand the power of capitalism, the pull of material well-being ...

Thatcher and her colleagues were excellent at appropriating and cherry picking words from popular youth slogans of the sixties, such as 'let individuals do what they want', and translating them into the Thatcherite ideology of economic liberalism. Most notably, the word held to be precious more than anything by the 1960s generation, freedom, was quickly converted into imply materialistic individualism that celebrated acquisitive selfishness. The baby-boomers found it difficult to defy the motto of the 'freedom of choice', which was coined to attack the suppressive welfare state and justify deregulation. To quote Diski again:

Certainly, we didn't *get* that "freedom" was not solely the property of the liberal Left. ... we were too young, and not thinking coldly enough, to imagine what a Margaret Thatcher might do with the word. ... I'd resist the claim that the Sixties generation were responsible for the Thatcher years, ... but sometimes I can't help but see how unwittingly we might have been sweeping the path in readiness for the radical Right, preparing, with the best of good intentions, the road to hell for paving.

It is the baby-boomers who led mass consumerism and the cultural revolution of the sixties. Having tasted some affluence in their youth as individualistic consumers, in the eighties, when the baby-boomers were no longer young, they were especially attracted to two policies implemented by the Thatcher Government: the discounted sales of council houses to willing tenants and the privatisation of the nationalised enterprises. The former policy was aligned with the home-centred lifestyle, which surfaced during the sixties, and the latter seemed to make greater self-fulfillment possible through stock-holding. Those who most enjoyed the sixties seem to have become the most receptive to the Thatcherite vision of popular capitalism, though whether their expectations were realized or not is another issue. While the age of affluence was gone by the mid-seventies, the memory of affluence remained with many baby-boomers.

3. Thatcher's Ascent and the Permissive Society: Explanation (ii)

The 1960s witnessed the emergence of the permissive society. The year 1957, when the Wolfenden report was published, could be regarded as a watershed year for the spread of permissiveness, culminating in a series of permissive legislations on abortion, divorce,

homosexuality, and theatre censorship in the late sixties. The growth of permissiveness was undoubtedly favourable for supporting Thatcher's career aspirations. Even in the Conservative Party, it became difficult to cling to old political conventions. In 1961, Thatcher, with just a brief parliamentary career since 1959, was given her first ministerial post in the Department of Pensions and National Insurance. This promotion, her first step to power, was pretty exceptional for that era and could be interpreted as Prime Minister Harold Macmillan's gesture to impress his departure from traditional gender divisions. Thatcher's bellicose and assertive behaviour, far from conventional femininity, was also, more or less, accepted in the permissive sixties. Her subsequent political ascent was relatively smooth, and she became the Secretary of State for Education when the Conservatives returned to office in 1970. As the only woman in Edward Heath's cabinet, she received significant public attention. Her political ascent, which went well beyond her own expectations, might have been much more sluggish without the permeation of permissiveness, although she was not an admirer of the permissive society.

In his book, *Capitalism and the Permissive Society*, published in 1973, economist Samuel Brittan, one of the most articulate exponents of economic liberalism, suggested that permissiveness and economic liberalism shared the same vector.

The revolt of young people against the pattern of their lives being decided by others or by impersonal forces they cannot influence is fundamentally justified. Precisely the same arguments are to be found in the classical defences of free markets, private property and limited governments.

Here, the Thatcherite deregulation was regarded as part of the broader trend of permissiveness. The following words by Roy Jenkins, a champion of permissive reforms, written in 1959, sound like Thatcher's.

Let us be on the side of those who want people to be free to live their own lives, to make their own mistakes, and to decide, in an adult way and provided they do not infringe on the rights of others, the code by which they wish to live.

The slogan of 'freedom of choice' was surely catchy enough to attract young consumers who valued self-determination.

4. Moralistic Reactions to Permissiveness: Explanation (iii)

Despite benefitting from the permissive society, Thatcher and her comrades took a clear anti-permissive stance in the 1970s. They accurately sensed the upsurge of

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moralist reactions to permissiveness and presented an antidote (which was later referred to as Thatcherism) for not only the economic and political crisis but also to the perceived moral crisis, aggravated by the 'permissive claptrap'. According to their diagnosis, the country's problems stemmed from a crisis of values, a 'disease of the spirit', or a dependency culture. Therefore, a remoralisation of the public, based upon Christian values, was proposed as the need of the hour.

To date, Thatcherism has received the greatest attention as an economic phenomenon, whereas its moral dimension has been relatively unexplored. Thatcherism, a countervailing moralist project at transforming people's minds, continues to remain influential today and is worth analysing. Following her mentor Keith Joseph, Thatcher believed that traditional virtues such as thrift, self-reliance, and diligence were indispensable for reversing economic decline. Immediately after the 1979 general election, the newly elected Prime Minister declared: 'The mission of this government is much more than the promotion of economic progress ... It is to renew the spirit and the solidarity of the nation'. In other words, her economic liberalism coexisted with her intention to intervene in the society's cultural norms.

During her years at Downing St., Thatcher did not legislate to overrule any of the permissive reforms of the sixties. However, anti-permissiveness was one of the main planks of Thatcherite ideology. In January 1970, when the *Finchley Press* asked her about the kind of changes she would like to see in the seventies, she first mentioned, 'a reversal of the permissive society'. Through her explicit appeal to traditional and conventional morality and self-portrayal as 'Maggie the housewife', an ordinary woman from a humble provincial family, Thatcher skillfully projected the image of a reliable and sympathetic politician, particularly among sections of the Conservative supporters. Those who felt uncomfortable with noisy music, sexual license, assertive feminism, drug addiction, the 'death of Christian Britain', and juvenile delinquency, both in and out of the party, found Thatcher to be a trustworthy defender of traditional values and virtues against permissiveness. For instance, Mary Whitehouse, a very peculiar but influential moral crusader leading the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association, earnestly supported Thatcher and contributed a lot to her party's victory in the 1979 general election. In 1980, Whitehouse was rewarded with a CBE for her cordial assistance.

As historian Raphael Samuel pointed out, her habit of 'translating policy issues into "moral economy"' was one of Mrs Thatcher's strengths, and not the least of reasons why she was able so frequently to wrong-foot her opponents'. Even her harsh economic policies, once coated with moral righteousness, became less bitter in the eyes of the public. Moreover, her moralist image-building was effective in making her appear less subversive and revolutionary. Although her reluctance to legislate for the rollback of permissiveness in the 1980s frustrated Mary Whitehouse, at least during the seventies

her anti-permissive discourses certainly promoted the rise of Thatcherism.

5. Concluding Remarks

Although the historical significance of the 1970s cannot be denied, the 1960s was equally, or even more, important as Thatcherism's historical origin. If the glory of the 'Swinging Sixties' was rather ephemeral, the sixties' ideals undoubtedly permeated the wider society in the later decades. However, the sixties' cultural legacy was inherited very selectively and often appropriated. It might be said that the Beatles paved the path to the dominance of one of the culturally poorest Prime Ministers, who rode the waves stemmed from the decade she rather despised. This is a great historical irony, indeed.

What Thatcher promised was regenerated Britain, in which individualistic ordinary people, equipped with virtues such as thrift, hard work, self-help, and self-responsibility, would be able to rationally pursue their own best interests in free and competitive market. For such regeneration the intervention in people's minds, as well as the emasculation of the welfare state, was imperative. In this sense, moralism was an essential ingredient of Thatcherism. However, Thatcher's Revolution was neither completed nor totally successful. The welfare state was certainly remade, but not dismantled; public spending was not reduced dramatically; and, the so-called 'Victorian values' did not become the British people's credo.

What Thatcher actually left after more than eleven years in office was the supremacy of selfish greed, explicit materialism and rampant individualism, leading to increasing polarization at the extremes of wealth and poverty, uncontrolled financial speculation, and a scores of isolated precarious workers (precariats) under the strong state's zero-tolerance policies. Her advocacy of remoralisation achieved almost nothing. Such outcomes were far removed from those expected by her puritanical supporters and herself. Thatcherite Britain was not a country where her parents' grocery shop could have prospered. Unintentionally her policies legitimized and promoted what she could not easily accept.

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