
Gender and power in Britain, 1640–1990

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Chapter 14

The end of consensus

"Permissiveness" and Mrs Thatcher's reaction, 1963–90

The 1960s marked the beginning of the breakdown in what had appeared to most Britons to be a postwar consensus about the appropriate nature of government and society. Forged in the heat and tragedy of the Second World War, the belief in a common future of full employment, social justice, and a minimum level of welfare for all people informed the politics of both the Labour and Conservative Parties, and served as the ideal to which their respective governments aspired while in office. As we have seen, the postwar consensus was a myth that concealed the reality for many, many people: inequalities abounded and gave rise to protest in the late 1950s. In the 1960s, when unemployment began its dramatic climb and Britain's economic situation turned sour, a series of popular and political counter-cultural movements appeared, which produced throughout mainstream society a profound sense of "moral panic," as one critic has termed it, over what many people regarded as a "permissive" culture out of control.

Notions of "permissiveness" contained at least two strands of thought against which conservatives railed: in one manifestation, permissiveness connoted the sexual revolution, gay rights, and feminism; in another, it referred to a purported breakdown in respect for law and order, a situation attributed to immigrants to Britain and their children, and articulated through a language of race. The advent of "Thatcherism," an economic, political, and cultural movement calling for a return to "Victorian" values, in 1979 in reaction to the "moral panics" of the late 1960s and 1970s marked a decisive end to the postwar consensus. Thatcher's call for a renewal of nineteenth-century economic, political, and even imperial philosophies and her championing of moral, social, and gender norms of an earlier time found great favor among a large segment of the population in a period when Britain's international status and economic conditions had fallen into steep decline.

Sexual revolution, gay rights, feminism, and "the enemy within"

The relative affluence of the 1950s and its apparent continuation in the years 1963 to 1968 among many sectors of the population spawned the creation of a dynamic and, to many, disturbing youth culture. Centered first around the mod fashions and the pop and rock offerings of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, and later gravitating toward punk groups like the Sex Pistols, youth culture marked a definitive shift of both cultural authority and resistance to mainstream society away from elite writers to a mass movement of working- and middle-class young men and women. Aware of the great pockets of poverty existing within their society of affluence, and subject themselves to the dead-end jobs that offered no means of escape from a lifetime of drudgery, working- and lower-middle-class youth, followed by huge numbers of their middle-class age cohort, gave vent to their frustrations and dissatisfactions with their parents' way of life by mocking their values and traditions and celebrating their own nonconformity with them. Mod fashions, rock music, experimentation with drugs, and the flouting of sexual conventions epitomized the generational revolt against postwar society, producing anxiety and unease among significant segments of the population.

In contrast to the mod and pop cultures, which presented an androgynous, "unisex," even feminine face to the world and were far more accessible to young women, the style and lyrics of rock groups struck observers with their sexual aggressiveness and their hostility toward women. In the songs of the Stones, for example, class antagonism frequently found expression through misogynous diatribes against wealthy women by working-class men. "Playing with fire" and "19th nervous breakdown," among others, scorned their upper-class female protagonists for their preoccupation with material possessions and their empty, superficial lives. In their live performances, the Rolling Stones sought to present themselves as sexually charged, violent, destructive, dangerous malcontents who were capable of almost any outrage. Mick Jagger, according to a contemporary rock critic, "trampled the weak, execrated the old, poured out a psychotic flood of abuse against women."

Freer attitudes about sex and sexuality, though not necessarily freer practices, accompanied the flowering of youth culture in the 1960s. The so-called "sexual revolution" derived from the convergence of a number of developments. First, the consumer market for sex-related commodities burgeoned in the postwar period, as affluence and a youth-age-skewed demographic upturn increased the commercial possibilities of selling sex. Advertising firms seized upon sex to sell any number and manner of products, taking their cue from the sexually explicit lyrics and erotic posturings of rock stars that so captivated youth audiences. Hugh Hefner's *Playboy* magazine capitalized on the commodification of sex with extraordinary

success. London's Playboy Club opened its doors in 1966, followed by a spate of less respectable, sometimes pornographic establishments that catered to a seemingly insatiable male demand for sexual pleasure. A kind of hedonistic lifestyle emerged in the "swinging" sixties, within which "wife swapping" and other unconventional sexual practices might take place. Censorship laws regulating the content of publications and the theater were overturned in 1959, 1964, and 1968. Savvy media types and entrepreneurs exploited the new freedom surrounding sex to improve their bottom lines, and in the process extended the scope of the "sexual revolution."

Second, the material consequences of sex for both men and women changed remarkably. The availability of the "pill," a reliable contraceptive, and of legal abortion after 1967, made it possible for women to engage in sexual intercourse with a much reduced fear of pregnancy. Venereal diseases like syphilis and gonorrhea could be readily treated by antibiotics. These material improvements could help to open up whole new possibilities of physical pleasure for women, who were more free to explore and experience sexual opportunities than previous generations of women had been. But they also made it possible for men to put a great deal of pressure on women to engage with them sexually; absent the constraints of unwanted pregnancy, women were far more susceptible to accusations of prudery and other forms of verbal coercion. As Celia Haddon put it in her 1983 *The Limits of Sex*, "in some ways, the sexual revolution had freed me from guilt and anxiety; in other ways it had enslaved me anew, with different fetters."¹ As we shall see below, the negative implications of the sexual revolution for women helped to provoke a new wave of feminism in the early 1970s.

Despite what appeared to contemporaries to be a dramatic change in sexual practices, actual sexual behavior remained pretty consistent with that of earlier decades. Attitudes and styles had altered, to be sure, but little in the way of real substantive behavioral change can be detected. Young people engaged in sexual relations at a younger age now, but improved diet and health consequent upon the provision of welfare benefits lowered the age of sexual maturation; physiological rather than moral shifts may well account for earlier sexual activity. In the late 1960s, a *Sunday Times* poll found that over one-quarter of the men and almost two-thirds of the women surveyed had been virgins at the time they married. Men and women might live with one another for a considerable period of time before marriage, but the rate of marriage did not fall; in fact it went up. Divorce rates rose with a liberalization of the divorce laws in 1969, but serial monogamy in the form of second and third marriages continued to be the trend among the vast majority of men and women.

The sexual revolution may well have appeared so threatening to many traditional and conservative people because it was closely tied in with other countercultural movements that challenged the political, social, and gender orders

of Britain. Anti-war protests, student demonstrations and sit-ins, racial equality and black power groups, gay rights organizations, and a powerful women's liberation movement appeared right on the heels of the "sexual revolution," presenting mainstream society with a multi-pronged assault on its values and institutions. The civil rights quest of catholics in Northern Ireland gave way to violence on the part of both catholics and protestants, which spilled over to the rest of the United Kingdom in the form of domestic terrorism. Union demands for higher wages and industrial unrest resulting in violence appeared endemic. The amalgamation of all these developments produced in the minds of a good portion of the population by 1970 the sense that a general breakdown in morality had occurred during the 1960s, that "enemies within" were undermining the nation, and that something had to be done to make Britain right again.

The appearance of a gay rights movement to reform the laws against homosexuality proved unsettling to many people, gay and straight alike. In 1957, the Wolfenden Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution had recommended that sexual activity between consenting males in the privacy of the home should not be illegal. The report did not produce legislation for another decade, when the passage of the Sexual Offences Act of 1967 decriminalized sexual activity between men over the age of twenty-one "in private" in England and Wales, though not in Scotland or Northern Ireland. (The act did not pertain to women, as lesbianism had not been recognized in the earlier prohibitions against same-sex behavior and laws against it did not therefore exist.) Over the course of the next decade, attitudes about homosexuality and towards homosexuals tended to become increasingly tolerant, so that by 1970 or so, gay men and lesbians felt sufficiently safe to abandon their closeted existences and venture out to form a distinct community with a visible subculture and lifestyle. Driven by the same market forces that generated much of the "sexual revolution," gay pubs, clubs, and discos sprang up. Among some gay men, the new freedom produced a great deal of promiscuity and hedonism; for most others and for lesbians generally, it offered an opportunity to live their lives honestly, comfortably, and openly. Eschewing conventional gender prescriptions for a society based on individual family units presided over by heterosexual couples of husband and wife conforming to current standards of masculinity and femininity, gays and lesbians offered alternative models for intimate relationships and community ties. These included families headed by same-sex couples or groups of gay men and lesbians acting communally to raise and care for children.

While the Sexual Offences Act of 1967 marked a liberalization of the law, it maintained significant exceptions that limited its reach and operated to increase discrimination against homosexual men. It did not apply to the armed services or merchant marine, for example. It strengthened the powers of the police to crack down on activity that might be construed as sexual in "public" places like gay bars,

or even in private homes where more than two men might be engaged in sexual activity. Northern Ireland and Scotland did not fall under its provisions. And where the age of consent for heterosexuals was set at sixteen years, that for homosexuals was raised to twenty-one years, making behavior that was perfectly legal for heterosexual couples criminal for homosexual couples if they had not reached the age of consent. Gay rights activists in England, Scotland, and Northern Ireland sought change in order to make homosexuals equal with heterosexuals under the law. The Campaign for Homosexual Equality, the Scottish Minorities Group, and the Union for Sexual Freedom in Ireland pooled their energies and resources in 1974 to demand passage of a bill that would lower the age of consent to sixteen; give "equal freedom with heterosexuals to express affection in public"; extend rights to homosexuals in the armed forces; and apply the law to Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Members of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) wanted to go beyond legal equality to eliminate attitudes and practices that oppressed homosexuals, and to instill pride and honor in those who identified themselves as gay or lesbian. "The long-term goal," declared GLF's manifesto, "is to rid society of the gender role system which is at the root of our oppression." In the early 1970s, their efforts appeared to be successful in some quarters of society. The *Manchester Guardian* published an article in 1971 expressing appreciation for what gay rights seemed to promise and for gay liberation's shattering of hateful stereotypes of gay men in particular. "The young homosexuals," the article noted:

by their very acceptance of the normality of homosexuality, challenge the status quo. ... And they are beautiful to see. It is lovely to be with men and women who are not ashamed to express their affections openly, in the normal heterosexual ways, the hand in hand, the arm in arm, the occasional cuddle, the quick kiss. Suddenly, watching them, the whole evil, squalid image of homosexuality crumbles — are these bright young faces corrupters of children, lavatory solicitors, the something nasty in all our woodsheds?

Later that year, Vera Brittain applauded the Gay Liberation Front in *The Times* for providing "an alternative to sexual shame." And in 1977, Maureen Colquhoun, Labour MP for Northampton North, announced that she was "gay and proud of it" in response to efforts on the part of the local branch of her party to remove her as a candidate for the next election. Local party members claimed that her record was unsatisfactory, but Colquhoun suspected that her sexuality was at issue. She fought against her de-selection as a candidate, insisting that "I am not 'Britain's Lesbian MP.' I am the working Member of Parliament for Northampton North and I am carrying on with my job. My sexuality is of no more relevance to that work than is the sexuality of heterosexual MPs — something people do not continually

question." The *Daily Mirror* supported her right to remain as party candidate despite her sexual identity, deriding the Labour Party as a whole for its hypocrisy in attempting to get rid of her on the basis of her work in parliament. Colquhoun's battle proved successful; she stood as Labour's candidate in the next election, only to lose her seat in the landslide victory of the Conservatives in 1979.²

Just as the gay liberation movement went beyond a mere reform of the laws to transform the culture that imposed upon them uncomfortable heterosexual norms as the basis for their relationships and their behavior, so too did women's liberation, arising in 1968 with demands for women's freedom from roles, portrayals, and expectations that limited, diminished, and oppressed them. The sexual revolution of the 1960s had placed a premium on men's pleasures and the fulfillment of their sexual desires at the expense of women, whose highly sexualized images appeared in magazines like *Playboy* and *Penthouse*, on billboards and posters, and on page three of the *Sun*. Women's liberation activists protested loudly and vividly against such depictions of women as sexual objects. One of their first actions took place in 1970 at the Miss World beauty contest in London, when a group of women interrupted the pageant by leaping on stage and blowing whistles, hooting, mooing like cattle, and brandishing signs that read "Miss-conception," "Miss-treated," "Miss-placed," and "Miss-judged." They lobbed stink bombs, flour bombs, and smoke bombs at the contestants, the judges, and at Bob Hope, the master of ceremonies. Their actions resembled those of the militant suffragists of the first decade of the twentieth century, and earned them the same result — arrest. They created a spectacle that succeeded in garnering for the movement enormous publicity.³

Some seventy women's liberation groups existed in London alone by 1969, spreading quickly to other cities in Scotland, Wales, and the Republic of Ireland. In 1970, the first Women's Liberation Conference convened in Oxford, the idea for which originated with socialist women affiliated with the new left History Workshop. Publications like *Shrew*, *Red Rag*, and *Spare Rib* appeared, analyzing women's oppression, recounting earlier feminist efforts, spreading the feminist message, and making claims for women's personal, sexual, and familial freedom.

The Equal Pay Acts of 1970 and 1975 and the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975 made it possible for women to gain equal treatment with men in education, training, and wage-earning. But "second wave" feminists looked for more than equality with men before the law; they sought changes in the law, the social and economic system, and the culture that would "liberate" them from current conceptions of femininity that, they argued, locked them into stifling, unfulfilling, slavish positions, and often made them vulnerable to sexual predations from men. Unlike contemporary liberal feminists and those of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, feminists seeking liberation believed that the very system in which they lived required abolition or complete overhaul.

Feminists differed in their designation of just what system it was that oppressed them. Socialist feminists, hailing from "new left" organizations like the International Marxist Group, identified capitalism as the source of conditions that rendered them inferior to men. Like Marx, explained Hilary Rose, who "was able to go behind the appearance of freedom in the labour market in which buyers and sellers freely bought and sold, to reveal the systemic relations of domination and subordination which are located within the capitalist mode of production itself," socialist, or materialist, feminists must "go behind — above all in personal life — the appearance of love and the naturalness of a woman's place and a woman's work, to reveal the equally systemic relationships of the sex-gender world."⁴ The family, in particular, socialist feminists argued, in which the understandings and assumptions and the labor force necessary to keep capitalism working were reproduced, required complete transformation. For socialist feminists, adherence to Marxist doctrine and to socialist groups remained a significant aspect of their politics, the goal of which was to eliminate the unjust class system produced by capitalism and reproduced by the family. The achievement of feminist aims would follow upon its extinction. At the same time, their insistence that women's work, experiences, and functions in a capitalist society could not simply be subsumed into those of men forced traditional socialists to enlarge their understandings and expand their analyses of capitalism.

Radical feminists, by contrast, saw in domination by men, in patriarchy and not in the economic system, the root of their oppression. They insisted that if women were to be liberated, they would have to arrive at a "consciousness" of their oppression. As Dale Spender put it:

a patriarchal society depends in large measure on the experience and values of males being perceived as the *only* valid frame of reference for society, and ... it is therefore in patriarchal interest to prevent women from sharing, establishing and asserting their equally real, valid and *different* frame of reference, which is the outcome of different experience.⁵

Having gained through "consciousness-raising" sessions at which they explored their personal lives in depth an understanding of how patriarchy operated in the most insidious ways to make women complicit in their own subservience to men, they would ultimately have to remove themselves from sexual and social relationships with men, radical feminists asserted. Separatism, as they saw it, provided the only avenue to liberation. As Amanda Sebestyn described radical feminists later:

we wanted to leave men no matter what, we started squatting so we could live with other women, we acquired of necessity new "male" skills of plumbing, electricity, carpentry and car maintenance, setting up our own discos and

then forming bands to dance to. We cut our hair very short and stopped wearing "women's" clothes, we stopped smiling and being "nice."⁶

Despite their differences, which would become increasingly evident and acrimonious in the mid- and late-1970s, feminists of virtually every stripe agreed that women's sexual freedom, their capacity to choose the kind of intimate or social grouping in which they would live, and determining for themselves the kind of work they would do, were vital to their liberation. They could readily come together to support reforms that contributed to that end: access to free and legal contraception and abortion; equal pay; health, educational, and social services; increased penalties for rape and domestic violence; nursery and day care for children; and provisions that enabled women to be legally and financially independent like divorce law reform and wages for housework. They made clear from the start that they intended their varieties of feminism to create entirely different roles, expectations, identities, and material realities for women than those currently operative. Their focus on personal and family issues, and on social and cultural practices – like the clubs, bookstores, magazines, and literature of the "sexual revolution" that gratuitously portrayed women as the proper objects of male sexual desire and violence – gave their movement a broad comprehensiveness that touched the lives of subsequent generations of women – and men – to come.

Women of color in Britain found themselves in a kind of political no-man's-land in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Disconcerted by their treatment at the hands of the male-dominated black power movement, yet finding women's liberation and feminism entirely irrelevant and blind to their needs and desires, women of color began, under the stimulus of the demands made by women in the revolutionary struggles in Zimbabwe, Angola, and Eritrea, to form their own organizations to gain liberation for themselves. Iyamide Hazeley graphically laid out the grievances black women felt within black power organizations in a poem called "Political union." "You call me 'Sister' Brother," she observed, "yet I know/ that it is simply a psychological lever to prise apart/ my legs. / 'Sister, make coffee for the movement, / Sister, make babies for the struggle' / You rape my consciousness with your body/ my body with reason, / and assuage your unconscious guilt by oral politicking/ make believing/ 'Sister, Sister.'"⁷

When they looked toward white feminist groups, black women saw a political programme that addressed few of their concerns. "We felt they had different priorities to us," remarked one woman instrumental in forming the Brixton Black Women's Group in 1973.

At that time, for example, abortion was the number one issue, and groups like Wages for Housework were making a lot of noise, too. These were hardly burning issues for us – in fact they seemed like middle-class preoccupations.

To begin with, abortion wasn't something we had any problems getting as Black women – it was the very reverse for us! And as for wages for housework, we were more interested in getting properly paid for the work we were doing outside the home as nightcleaners and in campaigning for more child-care facilities for Black women workers.⁸

In order to deal with a dual oppression arising from racism and sexism, a number of women formed other local Black Women's Groups throughout London and in cities like Leicester, Manchester, Liverpool, Sheffield, and Nottingham. Coalitions of women of color such as the Organization of Women of Asian and African Descent (OWAAD) enabled a broader national movement to emerge within which issues of racism and sexism that concerned women of color could be addressed and a national dialogue established.

As Hazel Carby noted in a hard-hitting article, the structures of racism meant that black women experienced different kinds of subjection than white women. What white women regarded as an oppressive institution – the family – black women often found to be a place from which to resist political and cultural forms of racism. White radical feminists might espouse separatism from men; black women relied on "progressive" men in their struggles for equality and justice. "Our situation as Black people necessitates that we have solidarity around the fact of race, which white women of course do not need to have with white men, unless it is their negative solidarity as racial oppressors." White feminists, Carby argued, had not recognized their role in continuing imperialist and colonialist regimes around the world, or, indeed, in acting as oppressors of black people at home, and if they did, they refused to acknowledge their complicity for fear "that this will be at the expense of concentrating upon being oppressed."⁹ Carby's critique of white women's feminism raised profoundly uncomfortable issues for many women, and it ultimately served to open up feminism as a whole to the existence of diversity in women's lives that compelled the development of far more sophisticated understandings of gender through post-structuralist analyses than either socialist or radical feminism had been able to provide.

The sexual revolution, gay liberation, and feminism profoundly challenged conventional norms of masculinity and femininity and of male and female sexuality. Together, within the context of rising unemployment, union intransigence, and economic downturn, they provoked in a good portion of the popular mind a conviction that standards of behavior and propriety were under grave assault, that "permissiveness" was producing "moral collapse" in Britain. Conservatives and traditionalists decried the apparent loss of a British "way of life," attributing it first to an "enemy within" in the guise of the younger generation, but increasingly seeing the threat to earlier values deriving from the presence of "alien," "outsider" immigrants. Distress over the "permissive" nature of society often found voice as a

lament about a breakdown in "law and order," so that popular anxieties about morality became collapsed into fears about crime and delinquency. And in Britain, by the early 1970s, crime and delinquency signified "blacks."

In the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, debates about immigration centered on criminal behavior on the part of blacks in Britain; they focused on what police and civil authorities believed was a disproportionate participation in criminal activities that were sexual in nature, and which usually involved white women. Newspapers, and in 1954, the Home Secretary, reported on the existence of a large class of black men living off the earnings of white prostitutes, pimping for them in numbers far in excess of their proportion to the population as a whole. In 1958, Tory MP Sir Cyril Osborne declared that "the tendency of those crimes to occur among coloured people is a hundred times more per person, than among white people in the London area."¹⁰ Fears of sexuality and of miscegenation dominated discussions of the roles played by immigrants and their children in the life of the nation.

By the late 1960s, these fears combined with anxieties about safety to produce a slightly different racial discourse. In 1968, Enoch Powell, Conservative MP for Ulster, had declared the settlement of blacks in Britain to be a threat to the nation's very existence. In his so-called "River of blood" speech, he foresaw, "like the Roman, ... 'the River Tiber foaming with much blood,' if immigration was not banned outright and the "re-emigration" of West Indians, Pakistanis, and Indians back to their countries of origin not put into effect. He framed his images of violence around a story about an elderly white woman under siege from blacks who had "invaded" her neighborhood. "Eight years ago in a respectable street in Wolverhampton," he recounted, "a house was sold to a negro. Now only one white (a woman old-age pensioner) lives there." Powell suggests an image of "negroes" breeding like rabbits till they have overwhelmed the white population. "With growing fear, she saw one house after another taken over. The quiet street became a place of noise and confusion. Regretfully, her white tenants moved out." Without their protection, Powell intimates, the pensioner finds herself at the mercy of her new neighbors:

The day after the last [white tenant] left, she was awakened at 7:00 a.m. by two negroes who wanted to use her phone to contact their employer. When she refused, as she would have refused any stranger at such an hour, she was abused and feared she would have been attacked but for the chain on her door.

This tale utilizes elements from the 1950s that emphasized the encroachment upon whites' private spaces by black people and the intimations of miscegenation and hypersexuality among blacks, and mixes them in with new fears about violence and personal safety. Isolated, alone, and unwilling to let rooms in her house out to immigrants, the white woman "is becoming afraid to go out. Windows

are broken. She finds excreta pushed through her letterbox. When she goes to the shops, she is followed by children, charming, wide-grinning piccaninnies. They cannot speak English, but one word they know. 'Racist,' they chant." In this account, in which the nation is represented by an elderly, frail white woman vulnerable to the sexual and physical threats of black men, Powell means to convey the ominous message that if blacks in Britain are given the same freedoms from discrimination that white Britons enjoy, then those very freedoms and the British "way of life" they represent will be destroyed in a traumatic blood-letting.¹¹

By the 1970s, concerns about the presence of blacks in Britain had shifted on to a slightly different ground, and what had once been the racist rantings of a fringe politician became core beliefs held by many a Briton. Crime in the forms of robbery, "mugging," and urban riots came to the fore in discourses about black settlement, race relations, and social disorder. One critic claimed that "in Britain, 'mugging' is, indeed, a form of self-employment ... that is disproportionately practised by unemployed West Indians." Black people, black men in particular, came to stand in for illegality, a decidedly "unBritish" trait, conservatives told themselves, despite the facts that government reports showed that "immigrant crime rates were, if anything, a little lower than those for the indigenous population," and union militancy, Ulster politics, and soccer "hooliganism" had been producing a great deal of violence among white Britons for years. Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police Sir Kenneth Newman declared that "in the Jamaicans, you have a people who are constitutionally disorderly. ... It's simply in their make up, they're constitutionally disposed to be anti-authority."¹² They represented for many conservatives the forces responsible for Britain's decline, for the social instability brought on by unemployment and recession. "The nation has been and is still being, eroded and hollowed out from within by implantation of unassimilated and unassimilable populations ... alien wedges in the heartland of the state," asserted Powell in 1976. By this time, his message of racial intolerance and of black people as the source of danger to British society had been embraced by a majority of Britons and would soon help to produce the electoral victory of the Conservative Party, with Margaret Thatcher at its head. As Alfred Sherman, a prominent right-wing theorist, put it in September 1979 on the eve of Thatcher's election as prime minister, articulating the affiliation of "permissiveness" with all of the countercultural and political movements we have been discussing:

the imposition of mass immigration from backward alien cultures is just one symptom of this self-destructive urge reflected in the assault on patriotism, the family — both as a conjugal and economic unit — the Christian religion in public life and schools, traditional morality, in matters of sex, honesty, public display, and respect for the law — in short, all that is English and wholesome.¹³

Thatcherism and the return to Victorian values

Margaret Thatcher sought to undo the system created by the welfare state and social democracy, and to return Britain to an economic, political, and social regime characteristic of the Victorian period. She abhorred what she saw as the socialism of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, seeking to replace it with an economy in which market forces of supply and demand, private ownership of industries, and *laissez-faire* prevailed. Politics, she declared, would no longer be a matter of "consensus" but of "conviction," promising an injection of firm authority and decisive action into a situation that, largely due to union intransigence over wages and industrial militancy, appeared to most to be one of "ungovernability." Britain would be returned to a position of world prominence, the "Iron Lady" asserted, pitting British nationalism against the collective aspirations of the European Community, taking a hard line against the Soviet Union, and sending troops to the far-off Falkland Islands to protect some 1,800 inhabitants of British descent from the Argentine government, which had invaded the islands and claimed them as its own. All of this would be accomplished, she promised, through a renewal of traditional values of morality, discipline, and restraint; an economic and social system based on unencumbered capitalism, élitism and social deference, and family life strengthened by a return to separate spheres for men and women; and a new "nationalist" spirit that incorporated Powellite racial thinking under its rubric.¹⁴

Thatcherite analysis of the country's grave crisis drew upon ideas formulated in 1971 by John Gummer, a man who would become a prominent Tory frontbencher after 1979. He compared Britain's current state of affairs to that of the nineteenth century, concluding that the combination of economic freedom and sexual repression characteristic of the latter period had been turned upside down, to the detriment of the economy and society. He stated:

The twentieth century has increasingly reversed that position ... restricted and cosseted us economically while leaving us more and more free to do as we like in bed. Today we are much more preoccupied with a man's economic effect on others. ... We protect the individual from every possible material harm which may come to him ... and restrict his freedom of material decision ... [yet] we increasingly deny, at least in theory, that private sin makes for public danger. Whereas the Victorians believed that the State had to be restrictive in the field of private moral actions or society would suffer, we believe that a man's private life is his own and the State need take no account of it.

Welfare state capitalism, Gummer lamented, had produced a society so lacking in moral direction that "the traditional moral standards of western Christian civilisa-

tion are not merely found difficult or merely ignored — they are actively challenged."¹⁵

For Margaret Thatcher, informed by Gummer's arguments, restoring Britain to greatness required first an ideological battle under which all other struggles were subsumed. She maintained the need to resolve the political and moral problems facing the country before the economic ones could be tackled. "Serious as the economic challenge is, the political and moral challenge is just as grave, and perhaps more so," she told the Conservative Party in 1975, "because economic problems never start with economics. They have much deeper roots in human nature, and roots in politics, and they do not finish at economics. ... These are the two great challenges of our time — the moral and political challenge, and the economic challenge. They have to be faced together and we have to master them both." The moral problems stemmed from the permissiveness of the 1960s, she maintained. "We are reaping what was sown in the sixties," she insisted in 1982. "The fashionable theories and permissive claptrap set the scene for a society in which the old virtues of discipline and self-restraint were denigrated."¹⁶ The breakdown of law and order, sexual freedom, gay rights, women's liberation — all the excesses of 1960s permissiveness would have to be eliminated, and virtue restored before the difficulties of the economy could be addressed. But those problems, too, she declared, could be redressed by a simple return to the days of the Victorians, when the principles of entrepreneurial capitalism and domesticity ruled society.

Thatcher resolved to deal with the "political" problem by introducing what one critic has called "authoritarian populism," a regime characterized by the exercise of the disciplinary powers of the state against what were regarded as disruptive elements in society who had no respect for law and order.¹⁷ At a time when the number of unemployed had reached two million, widespread concerns about law and order — shorthand in the parlance of many Britons for the existence of Indians, Asians, West Indians, and Pakistanis among them, whose "alien" cultures had come to be represented as being synonymous with violence and crime in Britain — enabled Thatcher's government to expand the power of the police, of the law, and of agencies of surveillance to control and suppress activities and behaviors it deemed dangerous to the state, activities and behaviors construed as "alien," "unBritish," committed by "outsiders." One such tool, the use of mass "stop and search" powers against black men and women in Brixton by the police in April 1981 provoked a major riot there four days later. The June debate over a new Nationality Bill demonstrated just how readily white Britons displaced on to racial "others" the consequences of economic problems that seemed to have no solution. MP Ivor Stanbrook declared:

we are in the grip of forces which, because of the large influx of immigrants into Britain, we now seem unable to control. Racial violence is occurring with increasing frequency. The British people are sick at heart about it all.

In July 1981, riots involving young people of all races and ethnicities broke out in a number of cities across the nation, prompting the *Financial Times* to declare an "Outbreak of an alien disease" in its headline, attributing to the presence of immigrants and their children protests produced by poverty, unemployment, and heavy-handed police measures.¹⁸

Economic difficulties and dislocations continued throughout 1981 and into 1982, creating much dissatisfaction in the country with the Conservative Party, which, it appeared in early 1982, was in danger of losing its majority in the upcoming 1983 election. Thatcher's popularity plummeted in the fall of 1981, while that of the newly created alliance between the Social Democratic and Liberal Parties soared. In March of 1982, the government of Argentina, acting on its claim that the Malvinas islands – what the British claimed as the Falklands, containing 1,800 people of British "stock" and 600,000 sheep – belonged to Argentina, invaded them, throwing Britons at home into a frenzy of jingoistic, neo-imperialist patriotism; prompting the British government to declare war; and, with victory secured in June 1982, re-establishing the popularity of Mrs Thatcher and the Conservative Party at record levels.

"Great Britain is great again," exulted Thatcher in the fall of 1982, collapsing victory over the unions and over nationalization of industry into that over the Argentines. "We have ceased to be a nation in retreat. We have instead a new-found confidence – born in the economic battles at home and tested and found true 8,000 miles away." As one perceptive critic noted of the enthusiasm surrounding the sending of the fleet to retake the Falklands from the "Argies," "if the Falkland Islanders were British citizens with black or brown skins, spoke with strange accents or worshipped different Gods it is doubtful whether the Royal Navy and Marines would today be fighting for their liberation." Indeed, he pointed out, "most Britons today identify more easily with those of the same stock 8000 miles away ... than they do with West Indian or Asian immigrants living next door."¹⁹

The victory over the Argentines gave white Britons something to feel good about; it seemed to mark an end to the humiliation they experienced with the loss of Britain's colonies and its pre-eminent position in the world. A new mood of decisiveness and strength, which Thatcher identified as the aspects of her ruling style that made her so popular with Britons at a time when economic conditions had only gotten worse, not better, seems to have reflected a nostalgia for imperialism, evidenced in the spate of films and media projects concerning the British in India. In what Salman Rushdie termed a "raj revivalism," films like *Gandhi* and *A Passage to India*, and the television productions of *The Far Pavilions* and *The Jewel in*

the Crown made their appearance and found welcoming, enthusiastic audiences. Britain seemed, once again, a manly nation in control of its destiny, one that is "not prepared to be pushed around." Its imperial incursion overseas had made it possible for Britons to "rediscover ... ourselves" and to "recover ... our self-respect. Britain found herself again in the South Atlantic and will not look back from the victory she has won." The great irony, of course, was that a woman, Margaret Thatcher, was responsible for this change in fortunes, a paradox we can comprehend only when we realize that gender – the knowledge we as a culture think we have about sexual difference, a phenomenon we believe to be grounded in nature²⁰ – has virtually nothing to do with sex.

Thatcher's moral agenda entailed the recreation of an ideology of separate spheres, in which bourgeois men displayed their talents in the freewheeling arena of industry and commerce, and bourgeois women presided over the home as guardians of the nation's morality. Drawing upon essentialized notions of gender familiar to nineteenth-century moralists and medical men, Thatcherites posited a womanhood whose inherent qualities of purity, innocence, and nurturance complemented – and controlled – the aggressive, sexual, destructive instincts of men. In practical terms, as envisaged by the American sociologist, George Gilder, to whose writings British moralists like Mary Whitehouse referred in their campaign for "moral rearmament," "a married man ... is spurred by the claims of family to channel his otherwise disruptive male aggressions into his performance as a provider for wife and children." Roger Scruton, a British philosopher, argued in "The case against feminism" in 1983 that it is the obligation of women to "quieten what is most vagrant" in men, namely the "unbridled ambition of the phallus."²¹ Feminists, in the minds of these thinkers, threatened the peaceful ordering of families and societies by injecting their individualistic, egalitarian demands and their assertions of sexual freedom, thus disrupting the harmony that sexual difference and gender complementarity established.

Although, as we have seen in the previous chapter, Margaret Thatcher had championed in the 1950s the right of women to work outside the home on the grounds that it made them better mothers to their children, her rise within the ranks of the party and her elevation to the prime ministership "owed nothing to feminism." Instead, Thatcher, it was said, was the "best man" to head the Conservative government. Thatcher's policies and her statements seemed to contain something of the same sort of contradiction that her life story indicated. On the one hand, Thatcherism espoused the return home of women who worked outside it. Patrick Jenkin, a cabinet minister in Thatcher's first government, insisted in 1979, "if the Good Lord had intended us to have equal rights to go out to work, He wouldn't have created men and women." In 1990, Thatcher told a BBC interviewer that nurseries for the children of working mothers undercut the welfare of children; her government slashed financial support for them. Thatcher's

policies hampered women who depended upon obtaining state-sponsored child care so that they could go out to work to help support their families. On the other hand, at the Pankhurst lecture in 1990, she lauded the contributions women had made and were making to public life, helped by "legislation and tax reforms to stamp out discrimination." These were women, she made it clear later in the lecture, who had the resources to hire "reliable help" to care for their children, "what my mother would have called 'a treasure': someone who brought not only her work but her affections to the family."²²

For Thatcher and her supporters, the Victorian model of the two-parent family in which the husband and father went out to work in order to support the wife and mother at home served as the ideal to which all should aspire. Strong families provided the bedrock stability of a secure society. "Marriage and the family are two of the most important institutions on which society is based," Thatcher asserted. "Particularly at this time of rapid social change and accompanying stresses marriage has never been more important in preserving a stable and responsible society."²³ Education secretary Kenneth Baker introduced legislation that would require schools to teach students about sex only within the context of "commitment, love and family life." The welfare state and educational opportunities for women, Thatcherites held, had weakened family ties by releasing them from a number of familial obligations and encouraging them to pursue opportunities outside of childbearing and -rearing. The resurgence of market force-based capitalism and the return of women to their proper sphere would restore society to the moral level it had enjoyed before "permissiveness" had undermined it. As one obstetrician declared in support of the efforts to reinscribe the Victorian system of separate spheres, "it is a fact that there is a biological drive to reproduce. Women who deny this drive, or in whom it is frustrated, show disturbances in other ways."²⁴ No nineteenth-century physician could have said it better.

Accordingly, efforts to change the abortion law flourished in the new climate of Thatcherism. The Abortion Reform Act of 1967 had made it legal for women to obtain abortions within twenty-eight weeks of their pregnancies, provided that a doctor certified that carrying the pregnancy to term would endanger the mental or physical health of the mother, the welfare of her other children, or result in abnormalities of the fetus. In 1975, 1977, and 1979, private members' bills were introduced into parliament, seeking to restrict access to abortion, to limit the number of weeks within which it could take place, and to make it easier for nurses and doctors to refuse to perform them on the grounds of conscientious objection. These bills failed, as did the attempt of the health secretary in 1981 to bypass parliament altogether by implementing an administrative change that would limit the meaning of a woman's "health" to a strictly physical definition.

Again in 1988, a bill that would outlaw abortion after eight weeks of pregnancy was introduced in parliament, but it too failed when a large campaign made up of

feminists, trade union delegates, Labour MPs, medical professionals, and the general public as a whole mobilized against it and defeated it. Public support for abortion proved far too strong – encompassing some 79 percent of the population – to overturn the 1967 act.

Efforts toward moral rejuvenation by means of anti-gay measures proved far easier to implement. The relative tolerance of homosexuality exhibited by society in the 1960s eroded in the 1970s and 1980s, as a backlash against "permissiveness" intensified. In 1981, the Criminal Law Revision Committee, upon which gay rights activists had pinned their hopes for an equalization of the age of consent for homosexuals to that of heterosexuals, recommended against such an action, arguing that it would be "wholly unacceptable to public opinion." Instead, it offered a compromise age of eighteen years. Tory MP Nicholas Winterton articulated the feelings of many in opposing even this reduction in the age of consent. "It's appalling that such a proposal is even being considered," he railed. "I will not tolerate recommendations that encourage youngsters to indulge in unnatural relationships." The Police Federation denounced the committee's recommendations, declaring that its members had "surrender[ed] to the pressure groups who try and persuade society that homosexual conduct is perfectly normal." It saw the 1967 Sexual Offences Act as liberalization enough, and condemned any further extension of reform. The government made known its opposition to further reform of the 1967 act by refusing to repeal the section of the law that excluded men in the armed forces from its provisions, and by taking up a private prosecution brought by Mary Whitehouse against a theater production for "procuring an act of gross indecency between two males." The play, *The Romans in Britain*, at the National Theatre depicted a scene in which the actors simulated anal intercourse. Before the case was thrown out by three judges at the Old Bailey, the government had spent £20,000 of the public's money.²⁵

Police raided private parties where gay men gathered, allegedly in violation of the provision of the 1967 act that made sex between more than two men a "public" activity. Arrests and prosecutions for homosexual "solicitation" rose dramatically: in 1977, 488 men were convicted of this offense; in 1980, 1,208 convictions were obtained, an increase of 247 percent in three years. In February 1984, two men were arrested and fined £100 for kissing in Oxford Street, their actions constituting "insulting behaviour likely to cause a breach of the peace." Similar arrests followed in subsequent months. Police harassed gay bars on the grounds that they violated licensing laws. Customs and Excise officials raided gay bookshops in London and in Scotland, seizing books by authors like Rita Mae Brown and Truman Capote. When some Labour MPs sought to bring evidence of the violation of civil rights that these incidents suggested before the public, they were excoriated by their Conservative colleagues. Reviving and revising a political slogan of 1964 when Tory MP Peter Griffiths defeated the Labour opposition candidate with

the cry, "if you want a Nigger for a neighbour vote Labour," a platform speaker at the 1985 Conservative party conference urged her listeners, "if you want a queer for a neighbour, vote Labour."²⁶ When the magnitude of the AIDS epidemic came to the attention of the British public in 1985, the anti-gay atmosphere of the past several years ensured that governmental response to it would be limited and ineffective in helping to slow its spread.

Press coverage of the AIDS crisis grew increasingly hysterical. In 1986, the media trumpeted the reaction of one Conservative leader of the South Staffordshire council to a film meant to educate viewers about AIDS and its transmission. "Those bunch of queers that legalise filth in homosexuality have a lot to answer for, and I hope they are proud of what they have done," he seethed. "As a cure I would put 90 per cent of queers in the ruddy gas chamber." When the Chief Constable of Manchester, James Anderton, announced that AIDS was "a self-inflicted scourge," and that gays, prostitutes, and promiscuous people generally were "swirling about in a human cesspit of their own making," the *Sun* cheered his remarks. "Their defiling act of love is not only unnatural. In today's Aids-hit world it is LETHAL. ... What Britain needs is more men like James Anderton – and fewer gay terrorists holding the decent members of society to ransom." The *Standard* weighed in with its kudos to Anderton for "articulating a deep-rooted feeling in Britain," while the *Sunday Mirror* headlined its edition, "WHEN BEING GAY SHOULD BE A CRIME."²⁷

The AIDS panic, the irresponsibility of the press, and the unsatisfactory response of the government produced a climate in which homophobia reached new heights. A 1986 Social Attitudes Survey poll found that some 70 percent of Britons felt that homosexual relationships were mostly or almost always wrong. In December 1987, following a speech by Thatcher in October in which she told the Conservative party conference that "children who need to be taught to respect traditional values are being taught that they have an inalienable right to be gay," a Tory MP introduced an amendment to a Local Government Bill that made it illegal for any local authority to "promote homosexuality or publish material for the promotion of homosexuality; ... promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship by the publication of such material or otherwise."²⁸ The amendment, which came to be called Clause 28, also banned local councils from providing "financial or other assistance" to anyone involved in the activities proscribed. Despite protests from the Labour party, from individual Labour politicians like Ken Livingstone, from prominent actors like Ian McKellen, from representatives of the worlds of art and literature, and from a newly united and galvanized mass gay constituency, Clause 28 passed the House of Commons in March of 1988 to become Section 28 of the Local Government Bill, passed into law in May 1988. "Moral rearmament" had produced a major victory in Thatcher's battle to restore "Victorian values" to Britain.

The mobilization of gendered and sexualized rhetoric to somehow deal with or disguise the problems faced by Britain in the world of the 1980s proved insufficient to save Margaret Thatcher when she ran up against an issue that could not be camouflaged by an appeal to morality. In the global economy of the late twentieth century, British fortunes would literally depend on the nation's willingness to join with the countries of the continent in a European union. Thatcher's unwillingness to entertain seriously the integration of Britain into Europe produced within her own party the idea that perhaps she was not, after all, the "best man" to lead the Conservatives. In 1990, she lost her position as head of the party, and thus as prime minister, to John Major, a man of far less "conviction" and "iron" than his predecessor. Thatcherism, having prevailed over British society and politics for over a decade, gradually lost its hold on the electorate, allowing for an easing of moralistic gendered, sexualized, and racialized prescriptions of an authentic "Britishness," and making way for a moderate, centrist style of rule under the Labour party's Tony Blair in 1996. Labour MPs counted among themselves, as did Blair's cabinet, a number of women, publicly identified gay men, and men and women of color in prominent positions. Sheer numbers suggest that the British electorate had grown intolerant of moral crusades against men and women identified as "enemies within" the state. When, in the autumn of 1998 some Labour MPs were "outed" and others threatened with exposure as homosexuals, the *Sun*, a popular tabloid, found that the vast majority of its readers, some 79 percent, did not care if an MP or cabinet minister was gay or not. The "moral panics" of the 1970s and 1980s seemed to have come to an end.

NOTES

- 1 Quoted in Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and Its Discontents: Meanings, Myths and Modern Sexualities* (London, 1985), p. 18.
- 2 Stephen Jeffrey-Poulter, *Peers, Queers and Commons: The Struggle for Gay Law Reform from 1950 to the Present* (London, 1991), pp. 102, 103, 136, 137.
- 3 See Barbara Caine, *English Feminism, 1780–1980* (Oxford, 1997), Afterword.
- 4 Hilary Rose, "Women's work: Women's knowledge," in Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley, eds, *What is Feminism? A Re-examination* (New York, 1986), p. 161.
- 5 Dale Spender, *Women of Ideas (and What Men have Done to Them)* (London, 1982), pp. 4–5.
- 6 Quoted in Caine, *English Feminism*, p. 266.
- 7 Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie, and Suzanne Scafe, *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain* (London, 1985), p. 147.
- 8 Bryan, Dadzie, and Scafe, *The Heart of the Race*, pp. 149–50.
- 9 Hazel Carby, "White woman listen! Black feminism and the boundaries of sisterhood," in Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain* (London, 1982), pp. 213, 221.

- 10 Quoted in Paul Gilroy, *"There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack": The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (Chicago, 1991), p. 81.
- 11 J. Enoch Powell, *Freedom and Reality* (London, 1969), pp. 287–8.
- 12 Powell, *Freedom and Reality*, p. 72.
- 13 Quoted in Gilroy, *"Ain't No Black"*, p. 43; John Solomos, Bob Findlay, Simon Jones and Paul Gilroy, "The organic crisis of British capitalism and race: The experience of the seventies," in Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain* (London, 1982), p. 27.
- 14 For one of the best critiques of Thatcherism, see Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (London, 1988).
- 15 Quoted in David T. Evans, *Sexual Citizenship: The Material Construction of Sexualities* (London, 1993), p. 73.
- 16 Quoted in Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and Its Discontents*, p. 18.
- 17 See Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal*, chs. 8, 9.
- 18 Solomos, Findlay, Jones, and Gilroy, "The organic crisis of British capitalism and race," pp. 29, 31.
- 19 Quoted in Gilroy, *"Ain't No Black"*, pp. 51, 52.
- 20 See Joan W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1988), Introduction.
- 21 Quoted in Weeks, *Sexuality and Its Discontents*, p. 42.
- 22 Quoted in Evans, *Sexual Citizenship*, pp. 243, 244.
- 23 Evans, *Sexual Citizenship*, p. 240.
- 24 Evans, *Sexual Citizenship*, p. 251.
- 25 Jeffrey-Poulter, *Peers, Queers and Commons*, pp. 159, 160.
- 26 Jeffrey-Poulter, *Peers, Queers and Commons*, p. 201.
- 27 Jeffrey-Poulter, *Peers, Queers and Commons*, pp. 193, 196–7.
- 28 Jeffrey-Poulter, *Peers, Queers and Commons*, pp. 218–19.

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