

# IN PRAISE OF POST-MODERNITY: A LIBERTARIAN PERSPECTIVE ON THE CONTRADICTIONS OF CONSERVATIVE EURO-SCEPTICISM

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Just as a previous generation of Marxists sought to liberate working people but ended up oppressing and impoverishing them, so an *imposed top down European order* will likewise undermine and divide. Already the contradictions of European policy are beginning to be felt. Ever higher levels of unemployment and comparatively slow growth rates are characteristic of a policy approach which emphasises an endless array of centrally controlled and funded health, education, welfare and development programmes — that whole panoply which is ‘modern democratic politics’.

## THE CONTRADICTIONS OF THATCHERITE EURO-SCEPTICISM

Although since 1979 British free market Conservatives have sought to resolve many of the problems created by decades of similar top down policies in the UK, it is important to recognise that Thatcherism itself contains a deep seated contradiction. On the one hand its supporters advocate the international free migration of capital, radical privatisation and the restructuring of British business along internationally competitive lines, while on the other they believe that the nation state, its sovereignty and its cultural identity can be ‘protected’, ‘preserved’ and ‘maintained’ in its traditional little England, nineteenth century form.

Thatcherites fail to recognise the profound challenge which a now rapidly globalising and technologically advanced capitalism poses to such statist concepts as *national sovereignty* and *national cultural identity*.<sup>2</sup> Importantly, they fail to recognise the cultural and political impact of globalising corporations and markets and the profound challenges to *all* forms of established political authority that this fundamentally new era poses, including to Europe.<sup>3</sup>

Privatised telecoms, de-regulated air travel markets, advanced satellite communications, an unprecedented increase in personal wealth, fax machines, the proliferation of personal computers, the rise of the internet and advanced forms of globally transferable and increasingly undetectable encryption methods all mean that politicians are slowly losing their capacity to regulate, order and control society from above. Thatcherite campaigns against pornography and erotica will become increasingly irrelevant in a world in which individuals can send virtually undetectable images instantaneously across the globe.

The debate between those who want to defend the Pound Sterling and those who advocate a Single European Currency will be irrelevant in an age when private and powerfully encrypted digital cash bypasses the political process and cuts off its life blood: taxation.

On the cultural front, once monolithic and inherently conservative political and religious belief systems are slowly being subsumed under the power and technology of the international free market. Uniform and absolutist belief systems are being progressively eroded as cultures are forced to relativise and mix. It is already becoming difficult to define such industrial age concepts as ‘Britishness’ in a post-modern world increasingly governed by a global elite of rootless entrepreneurs with loyalty only to their intellect and customers.<sup>4</sup>

As Kenichi Ohmae recently stated in his book, *The Borderless World*:

My observations over the past decade seem to indicate that the young people of the advanced countries are becoming increasingly nationalityless and more like ‘Californians’ all over the Triad countries — The United States, Europe, and Japan — that form the Interlinked Economy.<sup>5</sup>

The post-modern age of global markets and the internationalisation of culture is creating an emergent spirit of one-worldly sophistication and tolerance which deeply appeals to the young of the advanced and developing world and is starting to dominate such arenas as popular music, advertising and literature. Today you only have to walk down a busy, cosmopolitan London street or switch on a TV to witness the globalisation and internationalisation of our culture.

The economic reality of personal choice and freedom is creating a social market of cultural diversity in which ever larger numbers of people are taking control of their lives and changing their identities and behaviour as and when they desire. The incorporation of cultural diversity can be seen in many spheres of activity, including architecture, art and popular music. Bhangra, for example, which is a melange of traditional Indian folk music and western rock, is a typical product of this fast emerging world.

As I write this paper, the Conservative Party is preoccupied with a leadership election between the Prime Minister, John Major, and his ex-cabinet colleague and Secretary of State for Wales, John Redwood. The question of leadership has arisen because the party is fundamentally divided on the issue of Europe and the general direction of policy. On the one hand there are those who favour a more integrated or ‘federalist’ future for Europe, and on the other there are those who side with John Redwood and claim that the European Union (EU) will threaten Britain’s ‘national cultural identity’, its ‘political sovereignty’, and its long term economic prosperity. They see Brussels and the European Union as being inextricably tied to the old ‘top down’ policies of interventionist command and control. They believe it threatens what they call the “British way of life”.

As will become clear in this paper, I believe that both positions are contradictory and ultimately doomed to failure, for they both rely on a misguided view of the world which is anachronistic and out of date. Not only do both wings of the Conservative Party misunderstand the revolutionary nature of the economic, technological and cultural epoch which humanity is about to enter; they also fail to understand the consequential logic of their own professed free market agenda.

## THE CONTRADICTIONS OF EUROPEAN UNION

From a marketing point of view the strength of the European Union is derived from a popular and widespread hatred of war, poverty, deprivation and social intolerance. Since its inception it has thrived on the belief that it can maintain peace and prosperity and unite its peoples in a harmonious transnational union.

However, just as the top down policies of the UK’s post-war consensus failed to unite the British people, or even reduce poverty,<sup>1</sup> so it is wrong for today’s pro-Europeans to expect that the EU can achieve these objectives. Instead of improving the life of millions of Europeans and bringing them closer together, such a quasi-socialist, corporatist agenda is destined to fail.

## Political Notes No. 110

ISSN 0267-7059 ISBN 1 85637 304 5

An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance  
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The views expressed in this publication are those of its author, and not necessarily those of the Libertarian Alliance, its Committee, Advisory Council or subscribers.

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

## WHY JOHN REDWOOD AND THE EURO-SCEPTICS ARE NOT LIBERTARIANS

Now, although John Redwood and his Euro-Sceptic colleagues advocate a more free market oriented approach to economics than the left of their party, and one can imagine them endorsing such radical policies as the privatisation of public space, roads, and even the police, they still nevertheless adhere to an out of date, top down policy agenda on matters of personal morality and lifestyle.

Like that of Thatcher before them, their rhetoric of free market choice and liberty is pervaded by an incoherent spirit of prescriptive authoritarianism. The right of the Party remains obsessed with the seemingly uniform imposition of such industrial-age institutions as the family, the monarchy, the House of Lords, the Pound, and the preservation of national culture. Instead of welcoming the reality of individual choice and tolerantly accepting homosexuals, ethnic minorities, members of new religions, and those who enjoy erotica, it is with some irony that the Conservative right now spends so much of its time opposing what is, to a great extent, the cultural product of its own free market revolution. Indeed, unlike New Labour and its post-modern allies in groups such as DEMOS, who actively and openly celebrate this new age of tolerance and diversity, the so-called 'free market right' of the Conservative Party now appears to be about as radical and open-minded on matters of personal liberty as Mr Brezhnev.

## THE EMERGING LIBERTARIANISM OF NEW LABOUR

The seemingly obsessive and anachronistic narrow mindedness of the Conservative right has enabled Tony Blair and New Labour to begin the process of capturing a new generation of supporters. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent abandonment of statist economics, Tony Blair's New Labour is well on its way to constructing a coherent identity which combines the Party's new-found belief in free markets with its traditional support for cultural tolerance and individual freedom.

Embracing free markets and actively celebrating the reality of individual choice means that Blair and his post-modern allies are well on their way to successfully redefining Socialism as just that — "Social-ism": being prosperous, owning your own home but at the same time respecting other people's lifestyle choices.

Already, Ken Livingston, the doyen of Labour's left, is reading from a post-modern script. In a recent interview in *Open Eye* he stressed his Libertarian credentials by asserting:

[We]...should actually allow the Third World to have free trade with the West. At the moment we force Third World countries to buy our finished goods on our terms and we don't allow them to sell the goods they can produce on their terms, which is basically agriculture. We have huge tariffs. So we have this nonsense that out of our taxes we pay vast sums to farmers to produce food which we don't use which means we pay through taxes to support farmers, we also pay for more expensive food and stop the Third World from selling us that food. So we're actually paying to increase starvation and destitution in the Third World. We shouldn't have this barmy system.<sup>6</sup>

Outlining his views on Labour voters and their cultural values he jokingly described them as being "urban perverts" and went on to state:

I think that's the term that Mrs Thatcher would perceive us to be. We're the sort of people Mrs Thatcher's parents warned her not to talk to when she was a little girl; we enjoy ourselves and our bodies. Mrs Thatcher was brought up in that great English tradition that happiness was a sin and we should suffer in this life so that you could sit at God's right hand in the next one and sing hymns — well I'd rather be happy in this one thank you.<sup>7</sup>

## LIBERTARIANISM AND THE LEFT

To free marketeers it is clear that there is a new and very healthy anti-state, anti-political, agenda to be captured in the UK and beyond. But whereas ten years ago the Conservative Party was the only viable choice, today the jury is out as to who is going to make this terrain their own. Unlike in the past, there are now many intellectuals on the left who have abandoned their adherence to statist economics and who are increasingly in tune with the cultural and socio-economic impulses of globalising free market capitalism.

I believe recently emergent themes on the left such as 'post-modernity', 'communitarianism', and 'collective self help', should all be welcomed by Libertarians, as their philosophical subtext contains strong anti-state, pro-choice, pro-free market messages.<sup>8</sup>

## TOWARDS A LIBERTARIAN FUTURE

Given this reality, it is perhaps now time for Libertarians to begin to re-assess the left and to understand the contribution it might make to the movement for liberty and prosperity. Indeed, every opportunity should be taken to tell politicians and state officials across the political spectrum that the old game of command and control is up and that a new agenda of anarchic, spontaneous and global order is coming. As Ian Angell, Professor of Information Systems at the London School of Economics, recently pointed out:

Everywhere the nation-state is in retreat. All the while citizens are losing their faith in the nation-state, seeing it as a peculiarly twentieth century phenomenon. For the state is failing to deliver its side of the Faustian pact, where the individual submits to the legitimate violence of the state in return for protection and security. Globalization has shown the James Bond myth, that the state is good and global corporations (Spectre) are bad, to be blatant propaganda on behalf of the nation-state. James Bond, the patron saint of the nation-state, is just now another dirty old man. The nation-state is based on the premise that the state owns the individual and that the leaders of the state can dispose of his property as they see fit. But knowledge workers call it social injustice: for there is no justice in equality. All taxation is theft. It is the state obtaining money with menaces. They say with derision that the "Common Good" isn't good, it's merely common! ... The very nature of the nation-state itself is mutating: increasingly it will have to behave as merely another form of commercial enterprise. According to western sentiment some states are becoming criminal enterprises, but those too will be part of global trade.<sup>9</sup>

The rise of privatisation, cyberspace, encrypted private digital cash and the globalisation of markets, culture, and information are the future for mankind. Today, any group which sets out to recreate the institutional agenda of the nineteenth century will be, like Marxism, consigned to the dustbin of history. Little Englanders and Little Europeans alike still have to learn this Libertarian lesson; but learn it they will.

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