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Telling Stories about Post-war Britain: Popular Individualism and the 'Crisis' of the 1970s

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Abstract: This article argues that, by the 1970s, people in Britain were increasingly insistent about defining and claiming their individual rights, identities and perspectives. Using individual narratives and testimonies, we show that many were expressing desires for greater personal autonomy and self-determination. We suggest that this was an important trend across the post-war decades, and of particular importance to understanding the 1970s. This popular individualism was not the result of Thatcher; if anything, it was a cause of Thatcherism. But this individualism had multiple political and cultural valences; desires for greater individual self-determination, and anger with the 'establishment' for withholding it, did not lead inexorably to Thatcherism. There were, in fact, some sources for, and potential outlets for, popular individualism on the left – outlets that explicitly challenged class, gender and racial inequalities. With this, we suggest the possibility of a new meta-narrative of post-war Britain, cutting across the political narrative that organises post-war British history into three periods: social democracy, 'crisis' and the triumph of 'neoliberalism'. The 1970s was a key moment in the spread of a popular, aspirational form of individualism in post-war Britain, and this development is critical to our understanding of the history of the post-war years.

Introduction: Narratives of the 1970s

In the popular imagination, the 1970s is recalled as a decade of political 'crisis' and 'decline': two damaging miners' strikes; power cuts and the three day working week; the oil price hike of 1973; high inflation; hung parliaments and fragile minority governments, and, most memorable of all, the 'winter of discontent' of 1978-9, with rubbish piling up in Leicester Square and bodies unburied. This

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story of crisis has become near-synonymous with a story of the inevitable *failure* of the British left, with recent warnings for instance that first, Ed Miliband and, later, Jeremy Corbyn were poised to take Britain 'back to the 1970s'.[1] The 1970s is the decade when the social democratic settlement is said to have broken under the weight of its economic, social and post-colonial contradictions, supplanted by an intellectually vigorous and well-organised neoliberalism peddled by various agents of the right. This view of the decade is familiar from popular depictions of the period – such as James Graham's 2012 play *This House*[2] – but it also still dominates survey histories of post-war Britain.[3] The 1970s is presented as the end-point of increasingly feeble attempts to maintain the post-war settlement, as its two great pillars, the welfare state and mixed economy, buckled under internal contradictions and external challenges which respected no national boundaries (relative economic stagnation, youth culture, the end of empire, to name but a few).

This historical account owes much to Paul Addison's famous theory of a top-level 'post-war consensus' on the framework and constraints of policy-making. This was first stated in 1975, just as Margaret Thatcher and Keith Joseph were beginning to develop a similar narrative – though in their highly politicised account the post-war 'socialist' consensus was blamed for supposed national decline.[4] Many challenges have been offered to Addison's thesis of 'consensus'.[5] However, the 1970s

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[1] See for instance, Kashmira Gander, 'Former Marks and Spencer boss Stuart Rose accuses Ed Miliband of returning Labour to the Seventies', *Independent*, 3 February 2015:

http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/marks-and-spencer-boss-stuart-rose-accuses-miliband-of-returning-labour-to-the-seventies-10019958.html; Matthew Parris, 'Socialist revival will drag us back to the 1970s', *Times*, 30 July 2016: http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/socialist-revival-will-drag-us-back-to-the-1970s-mbw297prv; accessed 29 Aug. 2016.

[2] James Graham, *This House* (London, 2013). First performed at the National Theatre, 2012.

[3] See for instance, Kenneth O. Morgan, *The People's Peace: British History since 1945* (Oxford, 1999); Peter Clarke, *Hope and Glory: Britain, 1900-1990* (London, 1997); Arthur Marwick, *A History of the Modern British Isles, 1914-1999: Circumstances, Events and Outcomes* (Oxford, 2000).

[4] Paul Addison, *The Road to 1945: British Politics and the Second World War* (London, 1994); Robert Saunders, '"Crisis? What Crisis?" Thatcherism and the Seventies', in Ben Jackson and Robert Saunders (eds), *Making Thatcher's Britain* (Cambridge, 2012), 25-43.

remains the critical turning point in almost all narrative histories of post-war Britain. These histories often acknowledge that even in the 1950s or 1960s the supposed 'consensus' was never as monolithic or uncontested as that term suggests: Morgan calls it a mere 'façade'; [6] Marwick stresses that it was a 'surface [...which] sparkled', while marked by deep contradictions underneath. [7] Nevertheless, the powerful chronology of 'consensus' (or at least 'settlement'), followed by 'crisis', and the triumph of a 'neoliberal' or 'Thatcherite' framework peddled by the right, has remained the dominant political narrative by which to understand the post-war period, and particularly the 1970s. Despite historical revisionism, no alternative meta-narrative has, thus far, been convincingly offered.

For several decades now, historians have been working to destabilise and historicise the narrative of social democratic settlement, crisis and neoliberal triumph. Colin Hay's important work deserves first mention: as long ago as 1996, Hay demonstrated how the tabloid media, buoyed by Thatcher and her supporters in the Conservative Party, constructed a narrative which posited the 'winter of discontent' as the final crisis-point of the social democratic settlement.[8] Paralleling his work, various scholars have deconstructed the longer development of narratives of 'decline' (economic and post-imperial) which grew from the mid-1950s onwards.[9] Jim Tomlinson has also shown that far from marking the 'death of Keynesianism', the 1970s represented only the temporary eclipse of an economic model which in fact became *more* influential in the 1990s and 2000s than it was in the

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[5] Harriet Jones and Michael Kandiah, eds., *The Myth of Consensus: New Views on British History, 1945-64* (Basingstoke, 1996), see the introduction.

[6] Morgan, *People's Peace,* 3.

[7] Marwick, *History of the Modern British Isles*, 208.

[8] Colin Hay, 'Narrating Crisis: The Discursive Construction of the "Winter of Discontent"', *Sociology,* 30 (1996), 253-277.

[9] Jim Tomlinson, 'The Decline of the Empire and the Economic "Decline" of Britain', *Twentieth Century British History,* 14 (2003), 201-221; Jim. Tomlinson, *The Politics of Decline: Understanding Post-War Britain* (Harlow, 2000); Jim Tomlinson, 'Inventing "Decline": The Falling behind of the British Economy in the Postwar Years', *Economic History Review*, 49 (1996), 731-757; David Edgerton, *Warfare State: Britain, 1920-1970* (Cambridge, 2006).

1950s and 1960s.[10] More recently, Rob Saunders has shown how Thatcherites constructed a 'specific interpretation of the seventies that privileged particular responses' (Thatcher's own).[11] Several recent popular history books have also offered correctives to the picture of the decade as one of crisis: Alwyn Turner has highlighted the increasing take-up of many of the liberal reforms associated with the '60s, while Andy Beckett has emphasised the richness of popular culture and the prosperity many experienced, based on (by later standards) low unemployment and low inequality.[12] The discovery in 2004 by the radical think-tank, the New Economics Foundation, that by their new Measure of Domestic Progress (MDP) the best year since 1950 was 1976, epitomises this new, positive view of the 1970s.[13]

Yet, as Beckett admits, his book 'is not a complete rewriting of the decade. Something profound and unsettling did happen to Britain in the seventies, and Britons have been living with the consequences ever since'.[14] This unsettling thing, on closer inspection, looks remarkably like the breakdown of social-democracy: there were '[p]ressures building' and an 'unresolved political mood' that, inevitably, needed to be resolved.[15] Similarly, Turner in the end suggests that Thatcher's rise was the result of the political/economic crisis and the failure of social democracy to deliver: everyone else 'seemed to have run out of ideas on how to govern'.[16] In popular accounts the 1970s thus remain

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[10] Jim Tomlinson, 'Tale of a Death Exaggerated: How Keynesian Politics Survived the 1970s', *Contemporary British History,* 21 (2007), 429-448.

[11] Saunders, '"Crisis? What Crisis?"', 25.

[12] Andy Beckett, *When the Lights Went Out: What Really Happened to Britain in the Seventies* (London, 2010), 3.

[13] Alwyn Turner, *Crisis? What Crisis?: Britain in the 1970s* (London, 2008), Introduction; Beckett, *When the Lights Went Out*, 4.

[14] Beckett, *When the Lights Went Out*, 4.

[15] Ibid., 434.

[16] Turner, 'Outro', *Crisis? What Crisis?*, 274.

the key turning point, and, as Rodney Lowe wrote in 2007, the decade remains 'the great division of the post-war years' in academic histories, too.[17]

While revisionist works have deepened and complicated our historical understanding of the 1970s as a decade of 'crisis', Lawrence Black and Hugh Pemberton's recent reassessment of the decade potentially opens it up to new historical interpretations. Pemberton and Black insist that precisely *because of* the problems with the existing policy framework, the seventies was a decade of possibility, in which – in Peter Hall's phrase – a diverse 'marketplace of ideas' could flourish.[18] The contributors to their reassessment of the 1970s variously show that the construction of 'crisis' should be read in the strict meaning of the term as a moment of decision. It suggested *possibility* as well as danger. Thus Thatcherism appears not as the inevitable solution to an objective crisis, but as a contingent outcome; there were other possible solutions to the problems of the decade. Working with Black and Pemberton's notion of the 1970s as a decade of possibility, we want to suggest a different way of comprehending the political currents in motion at that time. Building on Sutcliffe-Braithwaite's research on the decline of deference in post-war Britain,[19] we want to highlight one key development of post-war culture which was pervasive by the 1970s and important in shaping the politics of the decade (and of the post-war period in general). That development is the rise of popular individualism, and, with this, the expansion of a particular politics of equality. This was a development which manifested multiple political possibilities, but which is rarely commented on in accounts of the 1970s. The growth of individualism, we argue, should not be seen as the 'result' of

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[17] R. Lowe, 'Review: Life Begins in the Seventies? Writing and Rewriting the History of Postwar Britain', *Journal of Contemporary History,* 42 (2007), 161-169, at 162.

[18] Lawrence Black and Hugh Pemberton, 'Introduction. The Benighted Decade? Reassessing the 1970s?', in Lawrence Black, Hugh Pemberton and Pat Thane (eds), *Reassessing 1970s Britain* (Manchester, 2013), 1-24, at 14; see Peter Hall's chapter for a discussion of the 1970s as a 'marketplace of ideas' in a different sense.

[19] Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, 'Class, Community and Individualism in English Politics and Society' (Ph.D. Dissertation, Faculty of History, University of Cambridge, 2014).

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Thatcherism. If anything, it was a trend Thatcher managed, through luck as well as political skill, to exploit.[20]

In the 1960s, the post-war settlement began to appear, from various angles, deeply problematic. This was particularly true for the left. The decade opened with many in the Labour Party asking if they could ever win again.[21] By its end, the 'rediscovery of poverty' was well underway, throwing into question whether social democracy had really managed to deliver on its promise to abolish poverty.[22] Even some supporters were turning against large-scale, technocratic, expert-led approaches to government – such as modernist redevelopments of the built environment, or distant, unaccountable forms of local government.[23] Harold Wilson's governments of 1964-70, elected on a platform of optimistic, forward-looking, technocratic rhetoric, had suffered a series of serious economic setbacks and political defeats, and Wilson was ejected from power in 1970.[24] The 1960s set the scene for the 1970s in several more key ways. While secularization was a long-term process (and, indeed, is a highly contested term), there were significant shifts in the 1960s: Callum Brown has described the collapse of 'discursive' Christianity in the 1960s, and, more recently, Sam Brewitt-Taylor has suggested that the growing conviction of many churchmen in the 1960s that

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[20] Jon Lawrence and Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, 'Margaret Thatcher and the Decline of Class Politics,' in Ben Jackson and Robert Saunders (eds), *Making Thatcher's Britain* (Cambridge, 2012).

[21] Mark Abrams and Richard Rose. *Must Labour Lose?* (London, 1960).

[22] Brian Abel-Smith and Peter Townsend, *The Poor and the Poorest: A New Analysis of the Ministry of Labour's Family Expenditure Surveys of 1953-54 and 1960* (London, 1965); Peter Townsend, *Poverty in the United Kingdom: A Survey of Household Resources and Standards of Living* (London, 1979); Selina Todd, 'Affluence, Class and Crown Street: Reinvestigating the Post-War Working Class', *Contemporary British History,* 22 (2008), 501-518.

[23] See Otto Saumarez Smith, 'The Inner City Crisis and the End of Urban Modernism in 1970s Britain', *Twentieth Century British History* (advance access, August 11, 2016); David Ellis 'Pavement Politics: Community Action in Leeds, c.1960-1990', PhD Dissertation, University of York, 2015.

[24] See R. Coopey, Steven Fielding and Nick Tiratsoo. *The Wilson Governments, 1964-1970* (London, 1993).

'secularization' was occurring might have been a self-fulfilling prophecy.[25] It was also in the years from around 1957, when the Wolfenden report into homosexuality and prostitution was published, to the flurry of 'permissive' legislation on abortion, divorce, and homosexuality in the late 1960s, that the view that the job of the state was to regulate *only public*, and not private, morality triumphed.[26] By the opening of the 1970s, the ways in which religion and the state attempted to regulate public and private behaviour had changed significantly.

Many of the markers of a more 'individualistic' society took off during the 1970s. This was the moment when untraditional family structures rose unprecedentedly: there were sharp increases in the rate of births outside marriage, and in the proportion of these which were jointly registered (suggesting cohabiting but not married parents), as well as in divorce.[27] The 1970s saw the explosion of 'identity politics' and new social movements organised around a huge variety of causes and identities.[28] It was also in the 1970s that class voting began to erode sharply, leading to the decade being dubbed one of 'dealignment'. Combined with rising mass consumption, 'dealignment' led to the eventual elaboration of various theories about a growing individualism in the British electorate; people turned less to tradition, habit, family and community example, and class identity when going

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[25] Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation, 1800-2000* (London, 2009); Sam Brewitt-Taylor, 'The Invention of a "Secular Society"? Christianity and the Sudden Appearance of Secularization Discourses in the British National Media, 1961-4', *Twentieth Century British History,* 24 (2013), 327-350; Danny Loss, 'The Institutional Afterlife of Christian England', *Journal of Modern History* (forthcoming, 2017).

[26] Report of the Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution (The Wolfenden Report), London, 1957, Cmnd. 247. See Chris Waters, 'Disorders of the Mind, Disorders of the Body Social: Peter Wildeblood and the Making of the Modern Homosexual', in Becky Conekin, Frank Mort, and Chris Waters, *Moments of Modernity: Reconstructing Britain: 1945-1964* (London, 1999); Stephen Brooke, *Sexual Politics: Sexuality, Family Planning, and the British Left from the 1880s to the Present Day* (Oxford, 2011), 134-151.

[27] David Coleman, 'Population and Family,' in A. H. Halsey and Josephine Webb, *Twentieth Century British Social Trends* (London, 2000). See Jane Lewis, *The End of Marriage?: Individualism and Intimate Relations* (Cheltenham, 2001).

[28] Adam Lent, *British Social Movements since 1945: Sex, Colour, Peace and Power* (Basingstoke, 2001).

to the polls. They made up their minds for themselves more often, changed their views more frequently, and weighed issues more carefully.[29] One team of sociologists concluded that 'each election is like a new shopping expedition'.[30] The metaphor points to the importance of the rise of the 'affluent society': many suggested, at the time and later, that the rise of consumerism in the post-war period was an important factor in the decline of the importance of class and the rise of a more individualistic society.[31] The result, by the 1970s and 1980s, was the proliferation of theories of 'dealignment' and individualism.

Of course, we need to view the rise of individualism in long-term perspective. Scholars have traced its development in various forms back to the Reformation, the Enlightenment, industrialisation, and a host of other transformations.[32] Multiple, interrelated economic, political, social and cultural developments need to be included in an explanation and description of the rise of individualistic attitudes post-war: the rhetoric of the 'People's War';[33] the post-war settlement, welfare state, and full employment that brought unprecedented security, 'affluence' and consumerism;[34] the end of

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[29] Bo Särlvik and Ivor Crewe, *Decade of Dealignment: The Conservative Victory of 1979 and Electoral Trends in the 1970s* (Cambridge, 1983), 113; Richard Rose and Ian McAllister, *Voters Begin to Choose: From Closed-Class to Open Elections in Britain* (London, 1986).

[30] Hilde T. Himmelweit, Patrick Humphreys, Marianne Jaeger and Michael Katz, *How Voters Decide: A Longitudinal Study of Political Attitudes and Voting Extending over Fifteen Years* (London, 1981), 14.

[31] E.g., Jeremy Seabrook, *What Went Wrong?: Working People and the Ideals of the Labour Movement* (London, 1978), 94-5.

[32] Emma Griffin, *Liberty's Dawn: A People's History of the Industrial Revolution* (New Haven, CT, 2013); James Hinton, 'Self Reflections in the Mass', *History Workshop Journal,* 75 (2013), 251-259, at 258; Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago, 1980); Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-century England* (New Haven, CT, 2004); Steven Lukes, *Individualism* (Colchester, 1973); Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, 2008).

[33] John H. Goldthorpe, 'The Current Inflation: Towards a Sociological Account,' in Fred Hirsch and John H. Goldthorpe (eds), *The Political Economy of Inflation* (London, 1978).

[34] Stuart Middleton, '"Affluence" and the Left in Britain, c. 1958–1974', *English Historical Review,* 129 (2014), 107-138.

empire and the concomitant crisis in the 'natural' (global and domestic) leadership of the British upper classes;[35] the end of military service; secularisation;[36] the expansion of education and the rhetoric (if unrealised) of meritocracy;[37] suburbanisation; the break-up of traditional communities; and companionate marriage.[38] Our intention here is not to try to disentangle this complex mixture: that is a much larger project. What we aim to do is to illuminate the character of this individualism in the 1970s, suggest some sources for it – sources which come from within progressive politics as well as elsewhere – and show that it did not lead in a straight line to Thatcherism, though elements of it could be drawn into line with her project.[39]

Thatcher is often presented as the chief architect of individualism; Hugo Young, for example, in a piece for the *Guardian* written in 2003 (and reprinted on the front page upon her death), identified as one of the three key changes for the worse associated with the Thatcher years a change in the 'temper of Britain and the British', as Thatcherism 'fathered a mood of tolerated harshness. Materialistic individualism was blessed as a virtue, the driver of national success'.[40] This was a widespread perception by the end of the 1980s. When Gallup asked in March 1990 whether certain things were 'in' or 'out' currently, 67 per cent of respondents thought that 'The "I'm alright Jack"

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[35] David Cannadine, *Class in Britain* (London, 1998), 158-9; Peregrine Worsthorne, 'Class and Conflict in British Foreign Policy', *Foreign Affairs*, xxxvii (1959), 419-31; Tomlinson, 'The Decline of the Empire and the Economic "Decline" of Britain'.

[36] Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*.

[37] See Selina Todd, 'Educational Failure and Working-class Experience in England, 1918-2010', paper presented at the North American Conference on British Studies, Nov. 2014; Guy Ortolano, *The Two Cultures Controversy: Science, Literature and Cultural Politics in Postwar Britain,* (Cambridge, 2009).

[38] Claire Langhamer, *The English in Love: The Intimate Story of an Emotional Revolution* (Oxford, 2013).

[39] Ivor Crewe, Bo Särlvik, and James Alt, 'Partisan De-Alignment in Britain, 1964-1974', *British Journal of Political Science,* 7 (1977), 129-90.

[40] Hugo Young, 'She has Left a Dark Legacy that has Still Not Disappeared', *Guardian,* 9 April 2013, 2-3; see also, eg., Eric J. Evans, *Thatcher and Thatcherism* (London, 1997), 121, 124.

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attitude' was 'in'.[41] Young was echoing criticisms often made of the Thatcher governments. Sociologists like Harriet Bradley have imputed the spread of 'individualism' or 'the cult of individual responsibility' to Thatcher or the 'new right'.[42]

Under Neil Kinnock's leadership, Labour tried to reclaim from the Tories the status of the party standing up for 'individual liberty', while also implying that Thatcherism was the 'doctrine of callous individualism'.[43] By the late 1980s and early 1990s, focus group research showed that 'more individualistic values such as opportunities and choice' were strongly supported by many of the floating voters in the south whom Labour needed to win, but that these values were 'usually associated with the Conservatives'.[44] As an interviewee in Giles Radice's study, *Southern Discomfort,* put it, the slogan 'Freedom for the individual' was 'obviously Conservative. The Labour party would put you in a group'.[45] Labour increasingly tried to make itself the party of these 'individualistic' values, while also criticising the Thatcherite version of the 'individualistic society'. Blair and his supporters built their vision of 'socialism' around the central premise that it should be contrasted, not with capitalism, but with (Thatcherite) individualism; Blair argued that Thatcher was right in some limited areas, but went wrong in 'promoting a rampant individualism that too often ignored citizens' responsibility for, and interest in, promoting the wider health of society'.[46]

There are alternative ways of thinking about 'individualism', though, which do not give Thatcherism such an important place in the story. In the late 1970s, Jeremy Seabrook posited consumer

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[41] *Gallup Political Index*, no. 355, March 1990.

[42] Harriet Bradley, *Gender and Power in the Workplace: Analysing the Impact of Economic Change* (Basingstoke, 1999), 28 and 220-1. See also Howard Newby, Carolyn Vogler, David Rose and Gordon Marshall, 'From Class Structure to Class Action', in B. Roberts, R. Finngean and Duncan Gallie, eds., *New Approaches to Economic Life* (Manchester, 1985), 86-102, at 86.

[43] Final version of 'Democratic Socialist Aims and Values', from the Papers of Neil Kinnock, Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge, KNNK 2/2/5.

[44] Giles Radice, *Southern Discomfort* (London, Fabian Society 1992), 9.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Peter Mandelson, *The Third Man: Life at the Heart of New Labour* (London, 2010), 330.

capitalism as the driving force behind the supposedly corrupting influence of selfish individualism.[47]

By contrast, the Young foundation's study of the East End of London in the 1990s blamed

immigration, the break-up of traditional communities, the so-called 'permissive' legislation of the

late 1960s, and the welfare state for eroding individuals' sense of responsibility to their communities

and families, and thus creating selfish individualism. This analysis was echoed by David Cameron in

his 'Big Society' lecture of 2009.[48] An important recent work of sociology, *The New Spirit of*

Capitalism, suggests a link between the radical left libertarianism of 'the spirit of '68' and the

development of a more individualistic capitalism.[49] This relationship was also noted (more

admiringly!) at the time – as in the 1973 essay *Capitalism and the Permissive Society* by the

economist Samuel Brittan, which suggested that '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 government.'[50]

Further to this, some sociologists have suggested that individualism should not be equated with

selfishness or greed, but can be seen positively. Anthony Giddens's thinking about individualism in

the 1990s was influenced by both Ronald Inglehart's idea of 'post-materialism' and ideas about a

'postmodernization' of society and culture – though Giddens preferred the term 'late modernity'.

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[47] Seabrook, *What Went Wrong?*, 94-5.

[48] Geoff Dench, Kate Gavron and Michael Young, *The New East End: Kinship, Race and Conflict* (London, 2006), 106. David Cameron, 'The Big Society', Hugo Young lecture, 10 Nov. 2009, http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2009/11/David_Cameron_The_Big_Society.aspx, accessed 21 Nov. 2012.

[49] Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London, 2007). Boltanski and Chiapello map two strands of 'the spirit of '68': the 'artistic critique' of capitalism which emphasised self-development and expression against bureaucratic discipline and consumer conformity, and the 'social critique' with its concerns about the social suffering and egoism of the capitalist order. The duality of the meaning and memory of 'the spirit of 68' can also be found in Kristen Ross's critical text, *May '68 and its Afterlives* (Chicago, 2002).

[50] Samuel Brittan, *Capitalism and the Permissive Society*, reprinted as *A Restatement of Economic Liberalism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988 [1973]), 34

Giddens posited that modernity inaugurated a new regime of 'self-identity', wherein individuals had to shape their own biographies, and consumption choices became central as 'traditional habits and customs' decreased in importance.[51] What Giddens called 'disembedding mechanisms' prised social relations free from tradition, undercutting traditional hierarchies, so that 'self-identity becomes a reflexively organised endeavour'.[52] This did not equate merely to 'me first' sentiments, but to a wholly new orientation to life, based on personality and individual choice. Many 'new individualists', Giddens argued, had strong ethical attachments, often to what Inglehart had termed 'post-materialist values' like environmentalism.[53] In this article, we concur that the growth of individualism should not be seen as the 'result' of Thatcherism, and attempt to unravel some of the ways in which this conflation worked to exclude other forms which popular individualism might have taken in late twentieth-century Britain.[54]

In fact, the social democratic post-war settlement was a key driver of growing individualism, but in complicated ways. Recent scholarship has highlighted the limitations of British post-war social democracy. It was, in Britain, a political formation profoundly shaped by the long legacy of liberalism, for though the Liberal Party was replaced by Labour in the interwar period, liberal ideology (classical and new) flowed into and profoundly shaped Labour and the Conservatives. As Gareth Stedman Jones wrote, Attlee's welfare state was 'the last and most glorious flowering of late-Victorian liberal philanthropy'.[55] It was shaped by Beveridge and infused with ideas developed by the new liberals in the early twentieth century.[56] The welfare state was also built, of course, within a

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[51] Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge, 1991), 1. See Ronald Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles among Western Publics* (Princeton, NJ, 1977).

[52] Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 5.

[53] Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy* (Cambridge, 1998), 35 ff.

[54] With thanks to Guy Ortolano for clarifying this argument.

[55] Gareth Stedman Jones, 'Why Is the Labour Party in a Mess?', in Gareth Stedman Jones, ed., *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832-1982* (Cambridge, 1983), 239-256, at 246.

[56] See Michael Freeden, *The New Liberalism: An Ideology of Social Reform* (Oxford, 1978).

profoundly socially conservative culture, premised on women staying at home, and on class and

racial hierarchies that were blurred but in no way destroyed.[57] Critically, though, and somewhat

paradoxically, this settlement encouraged forms of individualism. As Carolyn Steedman argued, free

milk and orange juice at school created the feeling that she was worth something as an individual.[58]

Mike Savage has shown how post-war working-class identities were structured around claims to

'ordinariness', which was used to denote authenticity, individuality, and a lack of privilege. This went

hand-in-hand with a strong ethic of individualism (which might well find some roots in the long

history of working-class liberalism), and 'an insistent declaration on the individual as "natural"

sovereign of their own lives'.[59] Further impetus was given to the development of popular

individualism by the new left that developed after 1956; as Mathew Thomson has argued in

Psychological Subjects, the new left politics of the 1960s and 1970s were partly rooted in the belief

of the importance of self-realisation and self-transformation as the key to individual emancipation in

a repressive society. This was a politics which, Thomson argues, found its fullest realisation in the

Women's Liberation Movement.[60] In addition to emphasising that individualism had roots in left- as

well as right-wing politics, we also want to argue in this article that it had some possible (though in

the end often untaken) outlets on the left. There were always different visions of what individual

empowerment might look like, many of which suggested that personal liberation could be best

realised *through* collective responsibility, not in opposition to it.

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[57] For important insights into the persistence of class paternalism and moral authoritarianism within the social democratic project, see Jon Lawrence, 'Paternalism, Class, and the British Path to Modernity,' in Simon Gunn and James Vernon (eds), *The Peculiarities of Liberal Modernity in Imperial Britain* (Berkeley, 2011), 147-164. See also: Samuel Beer, *British Politics in the Collectivist Age* (New York, 1965); Susan Pedersen, 'Gender, Welfare, and Citizenship in Britain During the Great War', *American Historical Review,* 95 (1990), 983-1006; Jordanna Bailkin, *The Afterlife of Empire,* (Berkeley, CA, 2012).

[58] Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (London, 1986), 122-3.

[59] Mike Savage, 'Working-class Identities in the 1960s: Revisiting the Affluent Worker Study', *Sociology,* 39 (2005), 929-946, at 939.

[60] Mathew Thomson, *Psychological Subjects: Identity, Culture and Health in Twentieth Century Britain* (Oxford, 2006), Chapter 8, 250-288.

Such different visions of individual empowerment could, however, run up against each other. American feminist theorist Zillah Eisenstein suggested in her 1981 work *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism* that feminism historically was a project profoundly rooted in liberalism. It could not have come into being without the liberal concept of the individual and their rights to equality and autonomy. Yet she also argued that liberalism could never fulfil its promise of equality for women, because such a focus on the individual obscured patriarchal structures that oppressed women. Indeed, she suggests that liberal feminism contained the seeds of its own destruction/radicalisation due to the impossibility of attaining equality within a patriarchal state. Most importantly for our argument, Eisenstein also proposed a distinction between 'individuality', which she saw as a positive legacy of liberalism, and 'individualism' which she saw as a negative.[61] This tension between liberalism and radicalism, between 'individuality' and 'individualism', was one that we see running through many different politics of equality in this period, in the politics of race and class as well as within feminism. Furthermore, we can draw parallels between Eisenstein's suggestion that radicalisation could follow from liberalism's failure to deliver equality for women, and the wider inability of the post-war social democratic settlement to deliver on the equality it appeared to promise. This was one key aspect of the interlocking set of problems which were apparent to many by the 1970s. Yet, in the working out of such contradictions, there were left-wing solutions being developed in the decade. The right did not have all the answers.

Examining how popular individualism challenged class, gender and racial inequalities in sometimes surprising ways offers new perspectives on the 1970s, the social democratic experiment, identity politics, *lived* experiences, and the discursive triumph of 'neoliberal' ideas. In order to do this, we turn to 'ordinary' individuals' testimonies and narratives. 'Ordinary' was, of course, a deeply

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[61] Zillah Eisenstein, *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism* (Boston MA, 1981). Eisenstein posits the difference between 'individualism' and 'individuality' thus: 'By 'liberal individualism', I mean the view of the individual pictured as atomised and disconnected from the social relations that actually affect his or her choices and options; by 'individuality', I refer to the capacities of the individual conceptualized as part of a social structure that can either enhance or constrain his or his individual potential for human development.' 116.

politicised term in the 1970s and after. It carried claims of authenticity, the under-represented majority and echoes of the US notion of the 'silent majority'. This was fertile political ground. As Judy Atkins and Alan Finlayson have emphasized, prior to the 1960s, 'the masses' and 'the people' rarely appeared in conference speeches and 'usually as only an indistinct and passive third party'.[62] The 1970s witnessed a critical shift in the rhetorical strategies and authority-claims made by politicians: this period was marked by the emergence of the anecdote in political speeches.[63] Through anecdotes about 'ordinary men and women', politicians could claim that they represented 'commonsense values' against what was viewed, by some, as an increasingly distant state bureaucracy.'[64] Critically, by the end of the 1970s, 'ordinariness' had been inscribed by Thatcher with a set of middle-class values masquerading as classlessness. Thatcher mobilised this language to good effect, using the terms 'ordinary people' and 'ordinary working people' at 175 different public events between 1975 and 1990.[65] In this article, we examine 'ordinary' individuals' engagement with the politics of race, class and gender in the 1970s. Studying these sources destabilises popular narratives about the decade as one that witnessed, respectively, the radicalisation of ethnic minority politics, feminist awakenings, and the decline of the salience of class identities.

We need to ask how and why these overarching popular narratives of the 1970s were constructed, and if, when and why they came to resonate with individuals who might have experienced things

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[62] Judi Atkins and Alan Finlayson, '…A 40-Year-Old Black Man Made the Point to Me': Everyday Knowledge and the Performance of Leadership in Contemporary British Politics' *Political Studies*, 61 (2013), 161-177, 172. See, also, Amy C. Whipple, 'Speaking for Whom? The 1971 Festival of Light and the Search for the 'Silent Majority,' *Contemporary British History*, 24 (2010), 319-39.

[63] Atkins and Finlayson, '…A 40-Year-Old Black Man Made the Point to Me'.

[64] Enoch Powell, for one, began his infamous 1968 'rivers of blood' speech with the story of an encounter on the street between himself and 'a constituent, a middle-aged, quite ordinary working man employed in one of our nationalised industries.' For a discussion of Enoch Powell and claims of ordinariness, see Amy C. Whipple, 'Revisiting the "Rivers of Blood" Controversy: Letters to Enoch Powell,' *Journal of British Studies* 48 (2009), 717-35.

[65] Lawrence and Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, 'Margaret Thatcher and the Decline of Class Politics'. See also Margaret Scammel, 'The Odd Couple: Marketing and Maggie', *European Journal of Marketing*, 10 (1996), 114-26.

quite differently. How is public memory shaped from and through these diverse and contradictory experiences? Charles Tilly suggests that to really answer this question we must look to social processes—to 'creative interactions' and the 'improvisatory adventures' within social and political life—to explain the 'contingency, mutability, and negotiation of identity claims'.[66] In other words, he insists that we see political narratives as the outcome of 'negotiated interactions' between top-down and bottom-up exercises of power. Through using individual testimonies, we explore how people situated themselves within and against (meta)narratives of collective experiences of gender, class and race, and how these stories and categories shaped their sense of self. Writing histories that put individual subjectivities and everyday life centre stage reveals the diversity and complexity of experiences.[67] As Joan Scott has argued, listening to individual life stories has 'a decentering effect; it offers epistemological challenges to whatever are the orthodox categories of current historiography: surprising them, throwing them off their guard.'[68] It is by listening to the individual voices in the archive – their stories – that we might shake the historiography on Britain in the 1970s out of its orthodoxies.

Class, Individualism and the Decline of Deference

Lawrence Black and Hugh Pemberton argue in the introduction to *Reassessing 70s Britain* that this decade saw the reinstatement of the 'political salience of class'.[69] This section of the article will argue, however, that if we turn to the voices of 'ordinary' people in the 1970s, we find that many felt that 'class' had declined in post-war Britain, and that 'class identities' were complex, confusing and suspect. Why, then, did it seem to many commentators that middle-class and working-class politics were becoming more combative and self-conscious in this period? On one end of the political spectrum, the 1970s witnessed the growth of an array of more assertive middle-class organisations,

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[66] Charles Tilly, 'Political Identities in Changing Politics,' *Social Research*, 70 (2003), 605-620, at 616.

[67] Joan W. Scott, 'Storytelling,' *History and Theory*, 50 (2011), 203-9, at 204.

[68] Ibid., 205.

[69] Black and Pemberton, 'Introduction. The Benighted Decade?', 7.

as chronicled in Roger King and Neill Nugent's study of middle class campaigns in the decade.[70]

These ranged from ratepayers' associations to the new Middle Class Association, founded in 1974. A

letter to *The Times* in January 1975 claimed that the new organisation had 650 founder members.[71]

There was evidently a section of society which felt that 'middle class' had been made into a dirty

word, and who wanted to rebuild a sense of confident corporate identity for their class. The decade

also saw the publication of books like Patrick Hutber's *The Decline and Fall of the Middle Class, and*

How it Can Fight Back, summarized for the new Conservative leader Margaret Thatcher in a 1976

memo which called it 'timely, informative and crusading'.[72]

On the other end of the spectrum, there was in the late 1960s and 1970s a surge in trade union

membership and industrial militancy. Union density peaked in 1979 with 13,289,000 members.[73] The

rise in membership and militancy was often seen as a sign of the growth of 'class struggle' or 'class

consciousness' on the part of the working class. This was particularly the case in high-profile

industrial disputes like the Upper Clyde shipbuilders' work-in of 1971-2.[74] This upsurge in trade union

activity led some on the far left to identify a 'Big Flame' of new class consciousness.[75] The rise of the

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[70] Roger King and Neill Nugent (eds), *Respectable Rebels: Middle Class Campaigns in Britain in the 1970s* (London, 1979).

[71] L. P. S. Orr, *The Times*, 16 Jan. 1975, 19.

[72] Patrick Hutber, *The Decline and Fall of the Middle Class, and How It Can Fight Back* (London, 1976); and 'The middle-class struggle', 24 Aug. 1976, Papers of Margaret Thatcher, Churchill College Archives Centre, Cambridge, CAC THCR 2/6/1/173.

[73] W. Hamish Fraser, *A History of British Trade Unionism, 1700-1998* (Basingstoke, 1999), 231; Duncan Gallie, 'The Labour Force', in A. H. Halsey and Josephine Webb (eds), *Twentieth Century British Social Trends* (Basingstoke, 2000), 281-323, at 309. In 1974, union density crossed 50 per cent (60 per cent for men) for the first time ever.

[74] Alasdair Buchan, *The Right to Work; the Story of the Upper Clyde Confrontation* (London, 1972); John Foster and Charles Woolfson, 'How Workers on the Clyde Gained the Capacity for Class Struggle: The Upper Clyde Shipbuilders' Work-in, 1971-72', in Alan Campbell, Nina Fishman and John McIlroy, eds., *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics, Vol.2: The High Tide of Trade Unionism, 1964-79* (London, 1999), 297-325.

[75] Michael Barratt Brown and Ken Coates, *The 'Big Flame' and What is the IWC?* (Nottingham, Institute for Workers' Control, 1969).

Labour left, around MPs like Tony Benn and causes like that of the Clay Cross councillors (who refused to implement the Heath Government's Housing Finance Act of 1972, which reduced central government subsidies to council housing and increased rents), fed off and into this perception of an increasingly combative working class. Even at the time, however, some were suggesting that industrial militancy might not represent growing 'class consciousness'. There were differing ways of interpreting the social and cultural changes of the 1970s. In 1977, John Goldthorpe argued that the real reason for accelerating, apparently uncontrollable and inflationary wage-claims was 'the decay of the status order' as a 'mature' working class was no longer willing to defer to hierarchies of power and advantage with a 'symbolic and moral basis'.[76] Two decades of full employment, plus the discourses around the 'People's War' and welfare state had given people a fuller sense of citizenship and entitlement.[77] What appeared to some to be increasingly militant 'class consciousness' could *also* be read as increasing individualism and sectional conflict within a society with less economic growth available to defuse such conflict. It was significant that the increased trade union militancy involved a revitalised shop steward movement and much unofficial industrial action, suggesting a refusal to follow the demands of trade union hierarchies and a desire for grassroots action.

One of the key features of the 'Big Flame' was the challenge it supposedly presented to power relations throughout the economy, based on workers taking direct control of the industries in which they worked. The Institute for Workers' Control (IWC) was established in 1968 and explicitly presented its politics as part of the international student, worker and anti-colonial struggles of that year.[78] Such thinking was not limited to the far left. Radical Young Liberals were active within the IWC and even Jo Grimond, Liberal Party leader (1956-67), spoke warmly of syndicalism.[79] Where Marxism and radical liberalism came together was in their desire to see a vigorous community of

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[76] Goldthorpe, 'The Current Inflation', 196-7.

[77] Ibid., 203; see T. H. Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Class, and Other Essays* (Cambridge, 1950).

[78] Barratt Brown and Coates, *The 'Big Flame' and What is the IWC?*

[79] Stuart White, '"Revolutionary Liberalism"? The Philosophy and Politics of Ownership in the Post-war Liberal Party', *British Politics*, 4 (2009), 164-187.

citizens, actively engaged with determining both their own lives and the common good.[80] Whether

this is attributed to a post-1956 revival of classical republicanism, as in Geoffrey Foote's account, or

to the spread of more libertarian ideas in the wake of the 'permissivism' of the late 1950s and '60s, it

is clear that the desire for greater autonomy spread across the political spectrum. It was apparent in

schemes for wider share ownership, just as in those for workers' control of industry, and all

emphasised the need to reinvigorate the populace and shake them out of what Edward Thompson

named as the 'Great Apathy'.[81] This apathy was attributed by the New Left to the complacency of

affluence and the evils of consumption, and it would later be reworked by Thatcherism as

dependency on the welfare state. In each case, post-war Britons were cast as contentedly passive

recipients of the goods of the post-war settlement. But it is clear that many were far from content,

and were, in fact, frustrated by their inability to control their own lives.

In 1969 a Gallup poll found that 66% of respondents felt that people like themselves did not have

enough of a say in how the country was run. Large numbers also wanted more influence on

nationalised industries (68%), local authorities (61%) and both the BBC (61%) and ITV (62%). And just

under half wanted more control over trade unions (49%), banks and building societies (49%),

employers (47%) and their own working conditions (45%).[82] The appearance of trade unions in this

list is significant. Although 60% of Gallup respondents in 1968 thought that workers should be

represented on company boards, only 15% thought those representatives should be drawn from

amongst union officials (rather than from 'the factory itself').[83] A further poll in 1976 showed that

among factory workers, roughly equal proportions were opposed to unions controlling these

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[80] Geoffrey Foote, *The Republican Transformation of Modern British Politics* (Basingstoke, 2006).

[81] Amy Edwards, '"Manufacturing Capitalists": The Wider Share Ownership Council and the problem of "popular capitalism", 1958-92', *Twentieth Century British History* 27 (2016), 100-123; on the 'Great Apathy', see Foote, *Republican Transformation*, 27-8

[82] George Gallup (ed), *The Gallup International Public Opinion Polls: Great Britain, 1937-1975: volume two 1965-1975* (New York, 1976), 1072.

[83] Ibid., 1009-1010.

appointments as they were to management doing so.[84] This might appear to be a classic instance of anti-collectivist thinking, but if we reframe these debates as being about self-determination rather than economic ideology, it is the equivalence between unions and management which is most revealing. It suggests that neither was felt to represent the experience of the 'ordinary' worker. Similarly, in 1969, roughly comparable numbers of survey respondents felt that the government (75%), trade unions (70%), big business and the City (65%) had 'a lot' of political power.[85] There is good reason, then, to see antipathy to trade unions as a reaction against concentrations of power, rather than as reflecting an opposition to workers' representation or solidarity in principle.

In the late 1960s and 1970s, a clear and growing majority of the public agreed that workers should be represented on the boards of both nationalised industries and large companies, and that firms should have to get approval for polices which might cause redundancies or affect terms and conditions.[86] Workers were most keen to control holidays, hours of work and wages, followed closely by pensions, increasing productivity and the way their own work was planned. These were calls for workers' *participation* in industry, not the full-throated *control* of the IWC – the appointment and dismissal of company directors, mergers and takeovers, investments and strategic plans and access to companies' accounts were the lowest priorities.[87] This was why the left suggested (with some justification) that these proposals were merely a means by which 'workers themselves can be conditioned to be actively concerned […] with the perpetuation of the existing system.'[88] Nevertheless, this debate helps us to place the militancy of the IWC within the much wider context of general public demands for autonomy both in the workplace and the public sphere.

[84] Opinion Research Centre, *Employee Attitudes to Worker Participation in Industry* (London, ORC, 1976), 13.

[85] Gallup (ed), *The Gallup International Opinion Polls*, 1009-10; 1072.

[86] Gallup (ed.), *The Gallup International Opinion Polls*, 1277. For more detailed figures see Gallup Report, *Awareness and Attitudes to Workers' Participation* (May 1976).

[87] Opinion Research Centre, *Employee Attitudes to Worker Participation*. Gallup (ed), *The Gallup International Opinion Polls*, 1277. For more detailed figures see Gallup *Awareness and Attitudes*.

[88] Arthur Scargill, in Arthur Scargill *et al*, *A Debate on Workers' Control* (Nottingham, Institute for Workers' Control, 1978), 4-7, at 4.

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Even the milder proposals for workers' participation look surprisingly radical in retrospect. What some interpreted as evidence of growing 'class consciousness' in the 1970s can, thus, in some cases be better viewed as evidence for growing demands for autonomy and control.

Meanwhile, from the mid-1970s, various political scientists were suggesting that the role of class in shaping voting decisions was decreasing. In a series of journal articles in 1979 and 1980, Patrick Dunleavy suggested that consumption cleavages, particularly housing tenure, and sectoral cleavages, principally the public/private sector divide, should be taken more seriously as factors influencing voting decisions. As the public sector, white collar work, and home ownership grew in the post-war period, the numbers of people with 'mixed' class characteristics grew,[89] and the relationship between voting and 'class' became more complex. This was one reason why a different set of academics (Bo Sarlvik and Ivor Crewe) came to label the 1970s the 'decade of dealignment', where 'votes [were] decreasingly cast along class lines'.[90] But it was not only that people with 'mixed' class characteristics were growing in number. Between 1959 and 1983, even those from working-class backgrounds who remained in working-class jobs, in council housing, stopped voting Labour in such large numbers – down from 62% to 38%.[91] 'Dealignment' was about both changes in the composition of society and attitudinal change as people's political decisions became more volatile.

There are some superficial similarities between the political scientists' views about 'class' and those of Margaret Thatcher and her supporters. The latter argued (sometimes slightly contradictorily) that much of working-class Britain was more 'bourgeois' in the 1970s than it had been a decade or two before, and that 'class' was also now less important than it had been in people's minds. As early as

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[89] Patrick Dunleavy, 'The Urban Basis of Political Alignment: Social Class, Domestic Property Ownership, and State Intervention in Consumption Processes', *British Journal of Political Science,* 9 (1979), 409-443; Patrick Dunleavy, 'The Political Implications of Sectoral Cleavages and the Growth of State Employment: Part 2, Cleavage Structures and Political Alignment', *Political Studies,* 28 (1980), 527-549.

[90] Ivor Crewe, 'The Electorate: Partisan Dealignment Ten Years On', in Hugh Berrington (ed), *Change in British Politics* (London, 1984), 183-215, at 183.

[91] Ibid., 195.

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1975, Thatcher argued that 'the income groups have got all muddled up these days', and that people could not be classed so easily.[92] By 1988, she was arguing that 'divisions into class' were now 'outmoded and meaningless'.[93] This well-known 'anti-class' rhetoric from Thatcher has meant that there is a superficially compelling story about the decline of the importance of 'class' identities in the 1970s and the rise of Thatcherism. But it is a story which does not do justice to the real complexities in 'ordinary' people's thinking about 'class' and politics in the 1970s. Examining the themes that emerge from a study of vernacular discourses of 'class' in the 1970s gives us a rather different story.

First, among older generations – those who recalled life before the Second World War – there was a widespread emphasis on the ways in which strict class distinctions, exemplified by differences in dress, housing, stratified railway carriages, and above all the indignities inflicted on many working-class women in service, had declined in the post-war period. Ex-servant Margaret Powell's popular autobiography, first published in 1968 and reprinted several times, recorded the demeaning labour of service in the 1920s and the 'inferiority complex' she developed.[94] She presented the class divide of the time as stark and unrelenting:

> it didn't matter how much we servants quarrelled among ourselves, a united front was always presented to them upstairs. We always called them 'Them'. 'Them' was the enemy, 'Them' overworked us, and 'Them' underpaid us, and to 'Them' servants were a race apart, a necessary evil … In the opinion of 'Them', we servants must never get ill, we must never dress too well, and we must never have an opinion that differed from theirs. After all it was

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[92] Thatcher, Granada TV *World in Action* special, 31 Jan. 1975, Margaret Thatcher Foundation (MTF) docid 102450, http://www.margaretthatcher.org/. See also, e.g., Thatcher, Speech to Parliamentary Press Gallery, 26 Jan. 1977, Thatcher CD ROM, 77_013; Thatcher, 'My Kind of Tory Party', *Daily Telegraph*, 30 Jan. 1975, MTF 102600.

[93] Thatcher, speech to Conservative Central Council, 17 March 1988, MTF 107200.

[94] Margaret Powell, *Below Stairs* (Bath, 1986), 207; Powell's book was recommended by John Langley, another working-class autobiographer, as 'the most remarkable illustration of what took place': John Langley, *Always a Layman* (Brighton, 1976), 58.

perfectly obvious, wasn't it, that if you'd only stayed at school until you were thirteen or

fourteen, your knowledge was very small in comparison to what they knew upstairs.[95]

The rhetoric of 'them and us' had powerful resonances with 'class' talk. Pre-Second World War

Britain was remembered as a strictly class-bound society. But we can hear in Powell's words a self-

conscious rejection of such attitudes and a pride in voicing attitudes which would quite clearly have

differed from the views of 'Them'. Even more, the popularity of Powell's memoir, with its emphasis

on her emotional experiences in a position of class subordination, speaks to a wider public

perception of social change, curiosity about Britain's (old) class-bound culture and interest in the

voice of the individual within it.

The same themes were recalled in other ex-servants' memoirs. Daisy Noakes reflected in her 1975

autobiography how after the war '[t]he gentry, finding no staff to run their large houses had to get

smaller ones they could manage themselves', and suggested that this 'has definitely eroded the

classes. Servants are not down-trodden now.'[96] This idea of an erosion of class lines was a sentiment

voiced by many of the 'Edwardians' interviewed by Paul Thompson and his team of oral history

interviewers in the early 1970s.[97] This did not mean that people did not see remaining structural

inequalities within British society in the 1970s. But the perception of a change in society was

perhaps more powerful for most people. Indeed, it was buttressed in the popular imagination in the

1970s by books like Thompson's *Edwardians* itself, as well as TV shows like ITV's *Upstairs,*

Downstairs (1971-5), which presented an image of a profoundly class-divided Edwardian society.[98]

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[95] Powell, *Below Stairs*, 101.

[96] Daisy Noakes, *The Town Beehive: A Young Girl's Lot, Brighton 1910-1934* (Brighton, 1975), 6.

[97] Paul Thompson, *The Edwardians* (London, 1979).

[98] Though as Steven Fielding's recent work has shown, the script of the latter was profoundly altered during

the production process. What had begun as a radical story of class conflict, entitled *Below Stairs*, eventually

became a paternalist tale of 'One Nation' unity across classes at a time of crisis – with clear lessons for its

Among the middle classes, some who had been born into middle class families in the post-war period still voiced attitudes of superiority relatively confidently and un-self-consciously. In Jane Deverson and Katharine Lindsay's *Voices from the Middle Class: A Study of Families in Two London Suburbs*, one young mother with two girls at private school and a husband earning £6,000 commented, 'I can't understand people who feel guilty about the working classes. People will always be different, even if everyone has the same houses and the same money. We'd always be richer in our minds than the working classes, just by reading books'.[99] This sort of snobbery was clearly alive and well among some sections of the 'middle class' in 1970s Britain. Yet others from middle-class backgrounds saw such attitudes as outdated. One woman in her late 40s contrasted her mother's 'colonial' attitudes toward servants with her own:

> my mother is appalled at the way I treat my daily. She thinks it's daft and can't understand it. A servant is a servant, as far as she's concerned. Well, I've had years of that life, but my daily, Elaine, is an educated girl, and I treat her as an equal. I sit with her in the kitchen and we chat like friends. She knows all about my life and I know all about her life. My mother's friends think I'm terribly trendy doing this, but times have changed.[100]

This was an increasingly common theme in people's discussions of 'class' in the post-war period: that class snobbery was outdated and illegitimate (though it is possible also to detect in this woman's words a certain pride in her 'trendy' attitudes which suggests a persistent sense of class distinction). While some solidly middle class people in the 1970s still felt comfortable 'looking down' on the working classes, others laid claim to a more egalitarian outlook.

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audience in 1970s Britain. See for instance, 'Period Drama Politics', *Archive on 4*, BBC Radio 4, 10 September 2016: http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07tqbw0.

[99] Jane Deverson and Katharine Lindsay, *Voices from the Middle Class: A Study of Families in Two London Suburbs* (London, 1975), 191-2.

[100] Ibid., 39-40.

Such sentiments were often linked to the experience of social mobility, which was, of course, an increasingly common one in post-war Britain. Johnny Black, a baby boomer and son of a railway worker, exemplifies this. Black was upwardly mobile, and over the course of the 1970s went from working as a government communications officer to being a music journalist. In 1974 he wrote in his diary (later deposited in the Mass Observation archive) that 'I can't accept the existence of social classes', and argued that one way to 'disband' them would be a 'government announcement, clarifying what the classes actually represent', and giving wage bands for each class based on a statistical survey. He thought that:

> [t]he first effect of the table, I hope, would be to cause a lot of people to rethink their image of what the class structure is really based on. Is it really money? If it had no other effect it would rapidly end any doubt about which class you fell into […] Many people who had thought themselves W would find that in money terms they fell into bracket M. This could cause a rethink […] The barriers might begin to be seen to be false, they might begin to show cracks. I realise the concept is far fetched, but at least in such a situation, when a class was mentioned the name would have a meaning, and not a stigma or a hidden insult.[101]

Black was hostile to all snobbishness or social stigma, and thus to the very idea of 'class'; his views here were profoundly shaped by his experience of social mobility, and the importance he placed on the values of individuality, freedom, and choice (values celebrated prominently in the popular culture that was so important to Black, who called himself a 'weekend hippy'). These were experiences and values shared by many of his generation, who benefitted from the post-war bulge in absolute levels of social mobility, made possible by the expansion of white collar professional and

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[101] Johnny Black diaries, Book 1, March 1974-May 1976, 18 July 1974, Mass Observation Archive, The Keep, Sussex, SxMOA99/5.

managerial jobs.[102] This helps to explain the increasing hostility to the very idea of 'class' found in sections of the middle classes, as well as the working classes, in the 1970s.

'Ordinary' people were concerned – perhaps unsurprisingly – with rather different questions than those of political scientists and politicians. While none of the individuals discussed here is reducible to a simplistic symbol of wider trends, nevertheless in their complex and idiosyncratic statements, certain themes can be detected. Ordinary people's attitudes to 'class' in the 1970s did not, for the most part, mirror Thatcher's statements and attitudes, though there were some overlaps in that many were hostile to the very idea of 'class'. While some still held strongly class-conscious views, many others, both manual and non-manual workers, rejected such thinking as outdated. In these self-conscious disavowals of 'classed' attitudes, we can detect just one way in which people rejected older conventions and insisted on their right to think and speak for themselves. The 1970s was not necessarily a radical turning point in attitudes to class but certainly represents a significant moment in a longer historical process: the slow and uneven unravelling of traditional attitudes towards inequality and social difference in post-war Britain.[103]

Recent academic work has suggested that ideas about participatory politics and economic organisation circulating in the 1970s had the potential to offer a left-wing response to public discontent with corporatism and with 'the Establishment' more generally.[104] Yet, as we know, it was

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[102] J. H. Goldthorpe, Catriona Llewellyn, and Clive Payne, *Social Mobility and Class Structure in Modern Britain* (Oxford, 1980).

[103] See Peter Mandler, 'Two cultures - one or many?', in Kathleen Burk (ed), *The British Isles since 1945* (Oxford, 2003), 127-55.

[104] See for example, Mark Wickham Jones, *Economic Strategy and the Labour Party: Politics and Policy-Making, 1970-83* (Basingstoke, 1996); Mark Wickham Jones, 'The Challenge of Stuart Holland: The Labour Party's Economic Strategy during the 1970s', in Lawrence Black, Hugh Pemberton and Pat Thane (eds) *Reassessing 1970s Britain* (Manchester, 2013), 123-148; Stuart Holland, 'Alternative European and Economic Strategies', in Lawrence Black, Hugh Pemberton and Pat Thane (eds) *Reassessing 1970s Britain* (Manchester, 2013), 96-122; John Medhurst, *That Option No Longer Exists; Britain 1974-76* (Winchester, 2014); Richard Jobson, 'A New Hope for an Old Britain? Nostalgia and the British Labour Party's Alternative Economic Strategy, 1970-1983',

the right which was able to mobilise expressions of 'popular individualism' in the service of a sustained attack on 'the Establishment'. Partly, this was because the various sections of the left (from Bennite to New, from Liberal to social democratic) remained invested in the existing forms of the post-war settlement. They also remained entrenched in an increasingly out-dated view of 'workers'. While the IWC, for instance, insisted that their vision included 'all workers professional, technical, clerical and manual', their valorisation of the manual (white) male worker – 'in docks or pits or factories' – was both indicative of their cultural assumptions, and out of step with the experiences of many of the individuals we examine throughout this article, as deindustrialisation was well underway by the 1970s in Britain.[105] In contrast, the way in which Thatcherism was able to appear not only classless and anti-Establishment but as an essentially anti-political 'common sense' provided a distinct advantage in appealing to some individuals resistant to being identified as part of a collective – whether on the basis of class, gender or race.

Gender Inequality and the Uses of Feminism

Here we turn to exploring how 'popular individualism' structured how many ordinary women engaged with issues of gender inequality in domestic labour and employment in Britain in the 1970s. We find, in this, a story of ambiguity and contradiction, with both popular *uses* of feminist ideas occurring alongside a popular resistance to the label 'feminist', and its associations with being part of a collective of women. A compelling story of female emancipation is told of the post-war period that links together the activism of Women's Liberation Movement, the passage of Equal Pay and Sexual Discrimination Acts, and the significant rise in the number of women working outside the home. Yet it is also widely accepted that the numbers of women who identified as 'feminist' outside

Journal of Policy History, 27 (2015), 670-694; Joe Guinan, 'Bring Back the Institute for Workers' Control', *Renewal,* 23 (2015), 11-36; James Moher and Alastair Reid, 'Democracy in the Workplace - the Bullock Report Revisited', *History & Policy*, 9 June 2010, http://www.historyandpolicy.org/trade-union-forum/meeting/democracy-in-the-workplace-the-bullock-report-revisited, accessed 21 Jan. 2016.

[105] Barratt Brown and Coates, *The 'Big Flame' and What is the IWC?,* 2-3. See also Richard Jobson, 'A New Hope for an Old Britain?'

of the Women's Liberation Movement was limited, and that feminism was largely confined to the educated middle classes in the 1970s and 1980s (though with significant exceptions). Thinking about these changes through the lens of 'popular individualism' allows us a way to reconcile these two narratives.

The Women's Liberation Movement itself can be understood as a project that was in some ways a product of a popular – and progressive – individualism. Of all the political movements of the 1970s, it is most associated with the decade, with the first conference of the new wave of feminism occurring at Ruskin College in March 1970. Like much of the New Left in the 1960s and 1970s, it was a project that was both collectivist and libertarian. It structured its activism around tight social networks and group work; yet it placed the experience of the individual at the heart of its theory-making. This emphasis on individualism is perhaps unsurprising given the historic links between feminism and liberalism as political philosophies. This emphasis on the rights and autonomy of individuals qua individuals both fundamentally shaped the nature of the call for women's equal rights, but was also an inheritance that most in the WLM tried to transcend in the belief that it was insufficiently radical. [106] Furthermore, Mathew Thomson has noted the importance of both psychology and the idea of individual fulfilment in the development of second wave feminism. As Thomson highlights, it was the process of consciousness raising – of understanding how individuals had internalised the structures of patriarchy – that feminists took as the starting point for political action.[107] Yet, as Thomson has also noted, there was a constant tension in the movement between the psychological bent of consciousness raising – which resembled individualistic therapeutic models from the outside – and the collective emphasis of the movement, which was never really resolved.[108]

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[106] For more on both the relationship and tensions between liberal feminism and the more radical variety espoused by the Women's Liberation Movement, Eisenstein, *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism*.

[107] Thomson*, Psychological Subjects,* Chapter 8.

[108] Ibid.

Feminism was thus in part, a product of the popular individualism this article discusses, and theoretically well placed to capitalise on it. Popular individualism amongst women provided a channel through which a limited engagement with feminist visions of individual female liberation could occur – and this was significant in terms of the increasing the propensity of women to claim equal rights as individuals. But more conservative understandings of the gender order still held much purchase. The lack of identification by most ordinary women with feminism during this period speaks to the lack of opportunity that many women had to step outside socially determined gender roles. The fact that feminist aspirations appeared to many of them to be unrealisable or unachievable tells us much about the limitations of popular individualism for women, and indeed, the ultimate failure of the post-war settlement to deliver emancipation for women. This was a 'feminist' moment, but it was a feminist moment only for a minority of women, and conservatism still often characterised how gender roles and relationships were enacted and experienced in the everyday.

Prominent feminist sociologist Angela McRobbie has critiqued the lack of attentiveness shown by some scholars to the precise processes linking the appearance of feminism as a social movement, and the changes in gender roles that we have seen over the twentieth century. In her 2009 work *The Aftermath of Feminism,* she critiques the work of sociologists particularly associated with reflexive modernity theory such as Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gernscheim, for their lack of engagement with feminism, claiming that 'it is implied that the changes which have occurred for women have come about in some kind of pain-free transition.'[109] Whilst McRobbie perhaps overstates the role of the organized feminist movement in producing these shifts, she is right to draw attention to the way in which individual agency has been obscured in accounts of the shifts in women's position over the last fifty years. Not only is feminism not taken enough heed of in the work of modernization theorists such as Giddens et al., but the problem is double-edged, for in

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[109] Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (London, 2009), 45.

accounts where it is placed at the centre of social change, feminism becomes something so broad

and all-encompassing that it explains everything and nothing about changes in attitudes towards

gender. So, for example, in Hugh Pemberton and Pat Thane's recent collection, *Re-assessing

Seventies Britain*, Thane writes that:

> Some permanent changes were for the better, such as those that came out of the women's
>
> movement of the 1960s and 1970s[…] [which] continued steady slow but somewhat
>
> accelerating, progress toward equal opportunities in work and education, equal pay and, to
>
> a lesser degree, in the home.[110]

Similarly, in the same volume, Lynne Segal writes that:

> The seventies were different, and especially for women. When women began meeting
>
> autonomously, networking and joining broader campaigns, local, national and international,
>
> collective agency and confidence grew surprisingly rapidly. It would end up changing the
>
> style, language, outcome and even the meaning of 'politics'.[111]

This metanarrative, where the progressive values of the women's movement gradually filter into the

homes of non-activist men and women, is reproduced in more popular works of history of Britain in

the 1970s.[112] But little sense is given of how, precisely, these changes took place. What mechanisms

enabled the shift from feminism as an idea, to something that could influence legislative changes,

and that eventually more profoundly came to affect the practice of everyday life? More

fundamentally, we should critically interrogate the extent to which we can read these social changes

as simply the product of feminism; such a link needs to be analysed rather than assumed. Certainly,

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[110] Pat Thane, 'Women and the 1970s', in Lawrence Black, Hugh Pemberton and Pat Thane (eds), *Reassessing 1970s Britain* (Manchester, 2013), 167-86, at 183.

[111] Lynne Segal, 'Jam Today: Feminist Impacts and Transformation in the 1970s', in Lawrence Black, Hugh Pemberton and Pat Thane (eds), *Reassessing 1970s Britain* (Manchester, 2013), 149-156, at 156.

[112] Beckett, *When the Lights Went Out*; Dominic Sandbrook, *State of Emergency: The Way We Were: Britain 1970-1974* (London, 2011).

shifts in the economic base, part of a wider shift of developed economies towards the service sector, is also a critical part of the story. Whatever the roots of change, historians need to understand how changes in gender relations came to be enacted through the micropolitics of personal relationships; how, as Helen McCarthy has argued in regards to masculinity, 'small and subtle shifts in sensibility and behaviour, replicated millions of times in millions of homes over the course of several decades could amount to a major transformation'.[113] Looking to these processes excavates the lived experience of social change and how equality claims were made in practice. It also shows that there were *vernacular* discourses about the equality (in difference) and value of women which did not owe much to academic feminist ideas but to other sources: discourses of companionate marriage, for example, or discourses of meritocracy in education. Listening to individual voices helps us begin to map these vernacular discourses. But it also begins to clarify the *limitations* of these discourses, which were, we argue, bounded by the ideals of individual self-fulfilment which could sometimes obscure collective and structural inequalities.

In the testimonies of 'ordinary' women (and men), it becomes clear that the ideas that individuals expressed about gender and gendered experiences were rarely coherent or consistent. The number of times in which interviewees in the various 1970s feminist sociological surveys that we will now turn to examine contradict themselves over the course of interviews tells us a story that is not so much about the ascendancy of feminism post-1968, but instead about the proliferation of vastly different ideologies of gender, many of which were far from new. Even more, these contradictions point to persistent tensions between women as autonomous beings and the claims of family life, both of which must be situated within the history of post-war entitlements in Britain. These tensions, which often appear in the survey interviews, seem to speak to an underlying conservatism about gender that persisted well into the post-'68 moment, but which nevertheless co-existed with moments in which possibilities for new understandings of gender can be glimpsed.

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[113] Helen McCarthy, Review of Laura King, *Fatherhood and Masculinity in Britain, 1914-1960* (Oxford, 2015), for *Reviews in History*, http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1778, accessed 1 June 2016.

A window into these tensions between individualism, feminism and collective action can be found, for instance, in two well-known feminist sociological studies, Christine Griffin's *Typical Girls* and Ann Oakley's *Housewife*. Both were the result of PhD research undertaken in the 1970s by Griffin and Oakley respectively, though *Typical Girls* was not published until 1985 (*Housewife* came earlier in 1974, and was written for a broader audience). What is particularly striking in Griffin's study is the extent to which domesticity still bound the horizons of the girls she interviewed, even at the tail end of feminism's 'miracle decade'. Here, interviewing three fifth-formers at a Birmingham comprehensive in 1979, Griffin finds that almost all assumed they would marry and have children, despite the fact that many were less than enthusiastic about the idea:

Christine Griffin: In the future do you think you'll get married?

Marjory: No no no. Definitely not. Not marriage. You just suffer man. You've got to rush home from work and cook and tidy up and….

Babs: You want a good time first before you get married. You get tied down.

Marjory: Enjoy yourself yeh. I'd live in sin really. And you have to do everything. You're fighting, arguing. I'd live with my man, yeh, but not marry him, I can chuck him out when I like.

Babs: What about kids then?

Marjory: I'd keep it, yeh, treasure it (laugh).

Jan: I'd get married but not till I'm about 30 (all laugh). I wanna enjoy myself, I don't wanna get bored. Get married when I meet the right one.

Marjory: Oh no, it'd be really horrible looking at the same person every day. You come in to the same old thing. I'd want a change me, I don't want to keep him forever.[114]

The way that marriage is positioned as the exact opposite to enjoyment is noteworthy here. Only Marjory – who was Afro-Caribbean, which Griffin believed was significant in her opposition to marriage, given that she was raised in a culture in which marriage was less normative and less valorised – showed any real resistance to future domesticity.

For Jan and Babs, meanwhile, domesticity was best deferred until after a period of 'good time'. As sociologist Claire Wallace also found in a study done with young women a year later on the Isle of Sheppey, many demonstrated a 'critical ambiguity' towards domesticity.[115] We can perhaps read into these deferments a desire for autonomy, a desire to be able to express oneself as an individual rather than just in a social role as a wife. These desires, intimately linked to post-war affluence, revolved around self-expression and fulfilment as an individual. These deferments can also be read as a way of managing the tensions between the opposing discourses about women's proper roles that were in circulation. Further, it allowed them to demonstrate a commitment to feminine norms whilst also signalling a dissatisfaction with them. Despite these dissatisfactions, however, the reluctance of the interviewees throughout the work to overtly align themselves with feminism mirrors Bev Skeggs' findings in *Formations of Class and Gender*, that working-class women were unable to identify with the women's movement because they simply did not see themselves as possible subjects for feminism, which they associated largely with career success and the world outside the home.[116] As with discourses of 'class', ordinary and political/public discourses did not always map onto each other easily.

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[114] Christine Griffin, *Typical Girls: Young Women From School to the Full-Time Job Market* (London, 1985), 55.

[115] Claire Wallace, 'From Girls and Boys to Women and Men', in Stephen Walker and Len Barton (eds), *Youth, Unemployment and Schooling* (Milton Keynes, 1986), 92-117, at 100.

[116] Beverley Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable* (London, 1997).

The trope of domesticity as confining was well developed in the interviews of Griffin, Wallace and

Oakley, and it is hard not to believe that this was at least due in part to the intense spotlight that had

been put on the plight of the housewife in the 1960s and 1970s by the media in Britain – of course,

partly as a result of feminist critique of housewifery. Yet, as Caitriona Beaumont has demonstrated,

such critiques of domesticity were part of a much longer debate about the role of women in the

home and marriage that predated second wave feminism by several decades, extending back to at

least the inter-war era.[117] These discussions were renewed in the early 1960s, when there was a

renewed attention to the problems of the housewife, as evidenced by the publication of books such

Hannah Gavron's *The Captive Wife*, and the formation of groups such as The National Housewives'

Register in 1960.[118] It is important to set these debates in this longer trajectory, and not to let the

radical moment of feminism in the 1970s distract us from other discussions about gender that were

happening in less overtly feminist spaces over a longer period.

These discussions fed into some of the contradictory ways in which women understood feminism, as

we can see by examining the testimonies of some of the women who Ann Oakley interviewed for

Housewife. As part of the interview, she specifically asked the women how they felt about feminism,

equality, and gendered roles in married life. The responses show how difficult it is to categorise

women's responses as simply positive or negative towards feminism; rather, once again, their

responses highlighted the proliferation of ideologies of gender that co-existed in considerable

tension with each other. Discourses of equality were welcomed to the extent that they protected

the status of women; what was not tolerated by many was the prospect of role reversals that might

threaten the current gender order. So, for example, when one woman, Margaret Nicholson, was

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[117] Caitriona Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens: Domesticity and the Women's Movement, 1928-1964* (Manchester, 2013).

[118] See Barbara Caine, *English Feminism, 1780-1980* (Oxford, 1997), 255-271; Hannah Gavron, *The Captive Wife: Conflicts of Housebound Mothers* (London, 1966).

asked whether she thought women had a better or worse deal in marriage than men, she responded:

> I'm not really for equality for women totally. Obviously I think women should get a fair deal – equal pay for equal jobs. But I wouldn't want to see it like it is in America – with a complete reversal, and the women in charge of the men.[119]

And then, when asked what she made of the Women's Liberation Movement:

> I think it's all right in moderation, but I'm afraid that what I think is that the people who are now in forefront of it have gone too far the other way. […] They just don't want men at all. They're not really interested in being equal with men; they're just interested in completely domineering men[120]

Another woman, Sally Jordan, responded when asked what she thought of women's liberation:

> I say equality is all right to a certain extent. A woman can never be as equal as a man: although they're not inferior, they'll never be quite as equal. That's my opinion. If you're all for this liberation movement, now I couldn't imagine myself doing what my husband does.[121]

An intriguing hint of the importance of individualism emerged, though, when Jordan was asked about 'equality', and responded:

> I don't think of myself as everybody. I class myself as me. So if I say I'm being treated unfairly, I don't know about anybody else. I'm just me.[122]

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[119] Ann Oakley, *Housewife* (London, 1974), 140.

[120] Ibid. 140 – 141.

[121] Ibid. 155.

[122] Ibid.

In this sense, individualism was not an inherently right-wing phenomenon, but it did prevent some from identifying with not just a collective class politics, but also a collective women's politics. Jordan was prepared to identify injustice as she saw it and to make a claim for her right to be treated fairly – but she made that claim through her rights as an individual, not as a woman.[123]

These case studies demonstrate the variety of discourses about gender that were available to draw on at this point, and that people put them together in ways that were often contradictory. Popular individualism provided one channel through which the goal of female-self-determination could be understood and identified with (on some level). But it also prevented many women from identifying with a collective women's movement. Although heated debate about women's role in the home has been a mainstay of the British media since at least the 1960s and was clearly visible enough to influence the ways through which many women understood domesticity as a 'trap', the ability of organised feminism to articulate a critique of women's role that resonated with the experiences of 'ordinary' women, and suggested a plausible alternative vision, was limited. This was partly because the social and economic opportunities that would allow women to live this alternative existence were limited at this point. By providing a close reading of first-person testimonies, we can develop a more nuanced sense of how 'ordinary' people engaged with both new and old discourses of the politics of gender; these engagements were often contradictory, and this reading thus defies any easy characterisation of the 1970s as a decade of opportunity for women.

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[123] Further examples of these competing discourses at work can be seen in Claire Wallace's interviews with young men as part of the Sheppey project, deposited in Qualidata archives at the University of Essex (project: SN 4860, '17-19 and Unemployed on the Isle of Sheppey', 1980), and in the interviews with young women that Wallace uses in *Typical Girls*. More broadly, the culmination of the Sheppey project, Ray Pahl's *Divisions of Labour* (Oxford, 1984) is testament to the unequal division of household labour during the 1970s and 1980s, though Pahl himself chose to interpret this within a functionalist model that stressed the complementary roles of men and women in the nuclear family.

Racism and the Promise of 'Equality of Opportunity'

One further political narrative of the 1970s is the racialization or, as Bill Schwarz puts it, the re-racialisation of England.[124] In this telling, 'black' and 'white' identities were marshalled, by Enoch Powell and others, into radical political positions that ran counter, in diverse ways, to the social democratic project.[125] Here, the challenges of multiculturalism functioned as a thorn in the side of popular belief in 'the public' of public ownership or universal social rights. The National Front served as a working class gateway into Thatcherism.[126] And, with the persistence of systemic racism across British society and public institutions, black activists came to eschew the paternalism of the British liberal state, embracing a global vision of Black Liberation.[127] This reading of the racialization of British politics tells part of the story. It positions race and nationalism as key elements of Thatcherite populism. And it connects the British black power movement to the story of divisions and radicalization within the left at this time. What we want to do in this section is tell another story. Though these histories are critically important, they give us an incomplete picture of the politics of

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[124] Bill Schwarz, '"The Only White Man in There": The Re-Racialisation of England, 1956-1968', *Race and Class,* 38 (1996), 65-78. For an important corrective to the view of the 1960s/1970s as the moment when race became the dominant organising force of British popular politics, see Jon Lawrence, 'Why the Working Class Was Never "White"' *New Left Project* (2014), http://www.newleftproject.org/index.php/site/article_comments/why_the_working_class_was_never_white, accessed 1 June 2016.

[125] Stuart Hall, 'The Great Moving Right Show,' *Marxism Today* (January 1979); Camilla Schofield, *Enoch Powell and the Making of Postcolonial Britain* (Cambridge, 2013).

[126] Anne-Marie Smith, *New Right Discourse on Race and Sexuality, 1968-1990* (Cambridge, 1994).

[127] Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (London, 1987); Robin D.G. Kelley and Stephen Tuck (eds.), *The Other Special Relationship: The Black Freedom Movement in the U.K. and the US* (New York, 2015); Joe Street, 'Malcolm X, Smethwick, and the Influence of the African American Freedom Struggle on British Race Relations in the 1960s', *Journal of Black Studies*, 38: 6, (2006); Anne-Marie Angelo, 'The Black Panthers in London, 1967-1972: A Diasporic Struggle Navigates the Black Atlantic', *Radical History Review*, 103, (2009); Kennetta Hammond Perry, ' "Little Rock" in Britain: Jim Crow's Transatlantic Topographies', *Journal of British Studies*, 51: 1, (2012); Robin Bunce and Paul Field, *Darcus Howe: A Political Biography* (London, 2014).

race in 1970s Britain and, we argue, an incomplete understanding of the pre-history of discourses of tolerance in the neoliberal era.

In this section, we want to consider the 'race relations' project (or what some have derisively referred to as the 'race relations industry') as another way into the history of racial inequality in 1970s Britain – a history that we argue critically intersects with the rise of popular individualism. The first Race Relations Act of 1965 instituted a massive state-led project to combat discrimination in Britain; this developed, by the 1970s, into over 100 local community relations councils and local race relations boards across the country, multicultural education units, plus whole new professions of race experts and advisors.[128] From its beginnings, it was seen as a means of managing and containing acute racism and its potentially radical political consequences for the black British population. The resultant race relations project marks a unique historical conjuncture in British history. It was rooted in the expansion of social science expertise, increasing emphasis on consumer rights[129] and state planning. Even more, it marks a unique moment in the history of British liberalism, wherein sociological theories about racial discrimination structured the state's efforts to control individuals' conventional, discriminatory behaviour within market relations.[130] It was also part of a broader international shift; in 1965, the UN passed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, helping propel the extension of anti-discrimination laws not only in Britain, but also in France, Australia, the Netherlands, Canada and the United States, to name just a few. The extension of human rights discourses and legal shifts themselves contributed to a politics of the individual. The archives of the race relations project show not only how it worked in practice, but also how individuals and politicized groups understood this new role of the state within British social relations.

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[128] Chris Mullard, 'The State's Response to Racism: Towards a Relational Response,' *Community Work and Racism* (London, 1982), 47.

[129] O.R. McGregor, *Social History and Law Reform* (London, 1979).

[130] For a discussion of the use of the research of American sociologist Robert K. Merton in the writing of the 1968 Race Relations Act, see Bob Hepple, *Race, Jobs and the Law in Britain* (London, 1970), 175-176.

Rather than telling a story of the unravelling or crisis of the post-war settlement in the 1970s, then, we simply want to place the race relations project squarely within the history of post-war social planning in Britain. While race relations legislation is usually associated with the legal recognition of discrete and protected collective identities, a key building block of later multicultural policy, another history emerges when we watch race relations law actually at work. There, the emphasis is less on the protection of culture than the protection of universal entitlements, social aspirations and 'equality of opportunity'. In fact, the race relations project highlights that welfarism remained fundamentally bound, especially after the rise of Butskellism, to that problematic concept of 'equality of opportunity'. This reminds us, too, that social services were never conceived of as a liberation from the market, but as a means by which to make market capitalism fairer and create better 'market actors'. As Philip Sooben, a researcher in Ethnic Relations at the University of Warwick put it in 1990, 'anti-discrimination legislation can be seen as a high point in the development of welfarism, in that it epitomizes the values of social democracy by insisting that all citizens should be able to participate in the benefits and opportunities created by welfare capitalism.'[131] At the same time, he argues, the very need for the laws revealed the failures of the welfare capitalist approach. Universal, formal equality for all citizens before the law had failed, in other words, to deliver structural equality. Again, the social democratic settlement was itself built on entrenched (gender, colonial, class) inequalities. And so, as John Solomos—who was also connected with Warwick's Centre for Ethnic Relations—argued in 1989, the concept of 'equality of opportunity' was not a 'value free criteria'; it was a 'contested notion' that was 'imbedded in value judgments, feelings and reactive responses about what constitutes the public good.'[132] These lines of argument highlight the fact that in order to destabilize the stories we tell about the 1970s, we need also to

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[131] Philip N. Sooben, 'The Origins of the Race Relations Act,' *Research Paper in Ethnic Relations No. 12* (September 1990), 4.

[132] John Solomos, 'From Equal Opportunity to Anti-Racism: Racial Inequality and the Limits of Reform,' *Policy Paper in Ethnic Relations No. 17* (November 1989), 2.

destabilize the historical orthodoxies surrounding the 'rise and decline' of Britain's post-war welfare state.

British race relations law built on the public order act of 1936, by making it a criminal offense to incite racial hatred, or more specifically racial violence, but this was less controversial and radical than its efforts to control racist, though often widely socially acceptable, forms of everyday discrimination between individuals.[133] Rather than being a criminal offence, unlawful discrimination would be a civil matter and would be dealt with through a conciliation process. Borrowing methods from American employment tribunals, race relations legislation instituted local and national committees to help resolve disputes between citizens. It relied on individuals to make claims. The papers of these committees offer a rich and untapped vein of post-war social history. They tell a story of individuals' understandings of both 'fair play' in the market and the role of the state in its protection.

The conciliation officers, as representatives of the state, negotiated the line between fairness and unfairness, the line between 'racial feelings' and personal animosity. Until 1976, unintentional discrimination was *not* illegal. The conciliation officer had to uncover *intent* to discriminate based on race. With this, they were entrusted to manage the boundaries of irrational discrimination and rational choice, or more accurately the divide between illegal acts of racial discrimination and legal acts of discrimination based on accent, behaviour and attitude. Again and again, defendants pointed to the abstract character traits of the claimants that had lost the claimant a possible job or a desired

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[133] For analysis of the political debates surrounding 1965 Race Relations Act, as it relates to freedom of speech, civic disorder and racial violence, see Christopher Hilliard, 'Words That Disturb the State: Hate Speech and the Lessons of Fascism in Britain, 1930-1960,' *Journal of Modern History* 88, 4 (2016), 764-796 and Gavin Schaffer, 'Legislating Against Hatred: Meaning and Motive in Section Six of the Race Relations Act of 1965,' *Twentieth Century British History,* 25 (2014), 251-275. For legal scholarship on anti-discrimination law in Britain, see Iyiola Solanke, *Making Anti-Racial Discrimination Law: A Comparative History of Social Action and Anti-Racial Discrimination Law* (New York, 2009); Anthony Lester and Geoffrey Bindman, *Race and the Law* (Middlesex, 1972); and Hepple, *Race, Jobs and the Law*.

home. It was not their race; it was that they were loud or 'unsuitable'. In many case files, the

claimants' very effort to claim equality in the market served as implicit proof that they were not

'reasonable' market actors. Local boards were made up of respected members of the community. As

the liberal lawyer Bob Hepple warned in 1970, the new conciliation committees had 'a very strong

middle class bias'. The best-represented occupational group was managers and businessmen,

followed by trade union officers, then university and college teachers, practicing lawyers, social

workers and school teachers.[134] Their records are filled with judgments of character, class-bound and

gendered assumptions and condescension. By listening to the archive, we humanise the practice of

state power and can begin to see the ways that individuals attempted to make claims through this

legislation, against everyday racism, often beyond the limitations of the law in practice.

For instance, we might tell the story of Mrs Wharton, born in Barbados, who went to the Race

Relations Board in 1975 to argue that the Paddington Churches Housing Association was wrongfully

attempting to move her family to a smaller flat, due to the racist complaints of the Irish woman who

lived in the flat below her.[135] The woman had complained of noise, but Barton recounted to the

Conciliation Officer that she'd overheard her neighbour say, 'We had a black one there before and I

got rid of her and I will see no more blacks here.'[136] Her claim to the board failed. This might have

been due to the small note at the bottom of the officer's page: 'When I entered the flat, the

television was on and the volume of noise was considerable. I had to ask Mrs Wharton to turn it

down or off so that I would be able to hear what she had to say to me.'[137] But we must consider,

despite the failure of her case, what inspired her to put forward her claim? How did the very

existence of anti-discrimination law contribute to how she understood and articulated her rights and

her experiences of everyday racism?

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[134] Hepple, *Race, Jobs and the Law in Britain*, 204.

[135] Report by Conciliation Officer, 8 August 1975, Wharton v Paddington Housing Association, CK 2/1463,
Commission for Racial Equality and predecessors, The National Archives of the UK.

[136] Ibid.

[137] Notes on meeting, 4 August 1975, CK 2/1463, TNA.

We might also tell the story of Mr Hughes, an Irish Catholic, who had worked on the Great Western Railway for 10 years and was, when his wife had a child, denied a house through the Great Western Housing Association. He insisted to the board that he was a good employee, and that he had even tried to avoid confrontations, even when he was harassed and called a 'mick'. Still, the conciliation officer found for the defendant: it was not his Irishness and Catholicness that was the problem in 1975, but that he was a 'trouble maker'.[138]

Or there is Mr Kahn; Pakistani in origin and university-educated. By 1969, he had been working in the UK for six years as a bus conductor. He tried for a clerical job in the Ministry of Social Security. When he failed at the interview without having been asked any substantial questions, he complained of discrimination. He appealed to the board:

> Being a University Graduate [I have been] denied every right of a respectable citizen for the last six years, [I] never went mad or became criminal in revolt. [I] just excepted [sic] every type of MENIAL OR MANUAL work and thus ruined my health and mind. OTHERWISE I AM WELL AWARE THAT IT IS A WELL-FARE STATE [that] spend[s] millions of pounds on criminals…just on [a] humanitarian basis and damn [any] care for a good soul being wrecked because of origins. I believe [this] because I have experienced it.[139]

Kahn's claim is framed around a belief in his own respectability and the failure of the state to defend the 'good soul' of a respectable citizen. His report and the personal reports of the others are steeped in anger, confusion and indignation. Despite the fact that all their claims were unsuccessful, their words speak a language of individual entitlement or, at very least, give us a sense of how individuals made sense of the limits and conditions of 'equality of opportunity'.

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[138] Report by Conciliation Officer, 2 February 1975, Hughes v Great Western Housing Association, CK 2/1379, Commission for Racial Equality and predecessors, The National Archives of the UK.

[139] Complaint of Unlawful Discrimination, 22 August 1969, Kahn v DHSS, CK 2/642, Commission for Racial Equality and predecessors, The National Archives of the UK.

Satnam Virdee argues that the years 1976 to 1979 represent a high point in the history of anti-racism when collective action against racism and class exploitation in Britain entwined.[140] He looks to the formation of Rock Against Racism, to the solidarity extended to Asian women involved in the Grunwick strike between 1976 and 1978, as well as to the Anti-Nazi League to show the significant formation of an anti-racist social movement 'unprecedented in scale and scope that remains unseen anywhere on the European mainland to this day.'[141] Both this history and the history of black cultural nationalism in Britain in the 1970s are critically important to understanding the politics of racial inequality in post-war Britain. But they don't tell the whole story. The obvious social aspiration and sense of entitlement of the claimants discussed above highlight that we cannot fully understand the politics of anti-racism in Britain divorced from the (unstable) markers of social class in the 1970s. The promise of equality of opportunity—as well as the gendered and classed beliefs about how that equality of opportunity might be achieved—would continue to structure anti-discrimination policy in the decades to come.

In the archive, we see the ways that certain individuals lived with these laws. Through the thousands of cases of individuals claiming equality through legal process, and through the volunteers and professionals who made up the machinery of the race relations project, we find what Charles Tilly would call the 'negotiation of identity claims'.[142] In many ways, these individuals give the anti-racism of the long 1970s a more complex politics, one that does not only revolve around the politics of recognition, or the consolidation of identity politics and collective action, or even the claims of citizenship. Their stories are not radical or activist histories. They tell stories of social aspiration and lost opportunities, of living as tolerated subjects. This gives us insight not just into the history of racism in Britain but also into popular beliefs about economic life, universal entitlements and individual dignity.

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[140] Satnam Virdee, *Racism, Class and the Racialized Outsider* (London, 2014), 123.

[141] Ibid, 124.

[142] Tilly, 'Political Identities in Changing Politics,' 616.

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Conclusion

In examining the ways in which individuals navigated the terrain of class, gender and racial identities, we have suggested that people were increasingly insistent by the 1970s about defining and claiming their individual rights, identities and perspectives. Many expressed desires for greater personal autonomy and self-determination, even if these desires were not always realised. The 'popular individualism' we have tracked in this article was not always a selfish and greedy phenomenon: it was not necessarily about having *more* than one's neighbour, but about having more autonomy and control than the non-political 'ordinary people' were felt to have had in the past. This popular individualism had, in other words, multiple political and cultural valences—from the self-expression of anarchist punks,[143] to social aspiration in the suburbs. Desires for greater individual self-determination, and anger with the 'establishment' for withholding it, did not lead inexorably to Thatcherism. In fact, this popular individualism could in many ways point towards an expanded politics of equality. In rejecting class snobberies and hierarchies as outdated, for example, many from younger generations suggested they wanted to live in a society less marked by cultural divides – even if the working of race relations boards shows that cultural class snobberies did still have powerful effects in the 1970s. This politics wasn't always harmonious, but it did open up interesting possibilities, many of which have since been forgotten or overlooked.

It was in the (long) 1970s that the categories of race and gender began to gain social and legal recognition. This, in turn, shaped the ways in which individuals understood themselves as gendered, racialised and/or 'tolerated' subjects. Through 'race relations' legislation, the state played a part in creating one framework for the assertion and protection of individual rights, and so encouraged people to view themselves and their citizenship rights in new ways. Although race relations legislation has tended to be understood as the state's recognition of collective and community

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[143] Matthew Worley, 'Shot By Both Sides: Punk, Politics and the End of "Consensus"', *Contemporary British History,* 26 (2012), 333-354.

identity, it was largely framed in terms of individual rights. There are useful parallels to be drawn

here with the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act, which similarly emphasised the right of individual women

to fair treatment. This and other legal changes giving women new rights in this period were not

primarily driven by the WLM. Transformative as movements like Women's Lib were for some

(particularly for those who ended up writing the histories), other processes and agents of change

were at work in the population at large. Looking at the politics of gender, class and race through the

lens of subjectivity and selfhood has the potential to radically alter our understanding of the

processes of cultural change. We have not tried to offer a complete explanation for the rise of

popular individualism in this article, but we have suggested that among its diverse drivers we must

recognise the importance of social democratic political achievements: the welfare state, which

promised equality (even if in paradoxical ways), and the new ways that individual rights were

enshrined in law in the late 1960s and 1970s.

In this article, we have tried to unpick some of the most common metanarratives of the 1970s – the

'death' of class politics, the feminist awakening and the radicalisation of ethnic identity politics. We

have done so by beginning our analysis with sources which give us insight into the words, attitudes

and narratives constructed by 'ordinary' people themselves in the 1970s. Starting here, as Joan Scott

suggested, will always tend to destabilise big narratives.[144] This is in one sense useful historical work,

helping to evoke the diversity and complexity of the past. But we also need to be able to tell bigger

narratives about the past. As microhistorians use the micro-case study to reconfigure larger

narratives, this article has used 'ordinary' voices to suggest the possibility of a new meta-narrative of

post-war Britain, challenging the one-dimensional 'rise and decline' narrative of British social

democracy.[145] That is, that the 1970s was a key moment in the spread of a popular, aspirational form

of individualism in post-war Britain, and that this development is critical to our understanding of the

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[144] Scott, 'Storytelling'.

[145] On micro-history, see Carlo Ginzburg, John Tedeschi, and Anne C. Tedeschi. 'Microhistory: Two or Three
Things That I Know About It', *Critical Inquiry* 20 (1993), 10-35.

history of the post-war years. This individualism was not the result of Thatcher. If anything, it was a cause of Thatcherism, but it did not point inevitably in that direction; some of those who discussed 'class' in highly individualistic terms, for example, were opposed to Thatcherism. Thus, this new individualism was not antithetical to the left. In fact, it was in some ways fundamentally rooted in left-wing policies that seemed to promise equality, autonomy, and the 'enlargement and cultivation of individual life,' in Nye Bevan's words.[146]

In the 1970s, the flowering of ideas about worker participation and control suggests that there were left-wing responses to growing demands for autonomy and control. The rise of community action in the same period – largely defensive in the 1960s but increasingly proactive and creative in the 1970s – suggests another avenue (blocked by Thatcherism) for the expression of such demands through left-wing politics.[147] Recent experiments in participatory democracy, policy-making from the ground up, and democratizing and localizing the economy suggest some other left-wing outlets for rising demands for individual participation and control across more areas of life, all of which have roots in the politics of the 1970s.[148] Taking the rise of popular individualism as an organising meta-narrative for post-war British history might help to displace the view of the 1970s as merely the crisis-point between social democracy and neoliberalism, precisely because this form of individualism had such complex relationships to both those political formations.

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[146] As quoted in Nicklaus Thomas-Symonds, *Nye: The Political Life of Aneurin Bevan* (London, 2015), 210.

[147] See David Ellis 'Pavement Politics: Community Action in Leeds, c.1960-1990', Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of York, 2015; David Ellis, 'On Taking (Back) Control: Lessons from Community Action in 1970s Britain', *Renewal,* 25 (2017).

[148] See, eg., Marjorie Kelly, Sarah McKinley and Violeta Duncan, 'Community Wealth Building: America's Emerging Assetbased Approach to City Economic Development', Matthew Brown and Martin O'Neill 'The Road to Socialism is the A59: The Preston Model', Jessica Studdert, 'Place-based Health: Why Local Accountability Would Lead to Better Quality and Outcomes', and Fernanda Balata, 'Shaping a New Deal for Coastal Communities', all in *Renewal* 24 (2016); Thomas Ferretti, 'Mondragon in Five Points', *Renewal,* 23 (2015); Joe Guinan, 'Bring Back the Institute for Workers' Control', *Renewal,* 23 (2015); Claudia Chwalisz, *The Populist Signal. Why Politics and Democracy Need to Change*.