

**Matt Clement**

## **Thatcher's civilising offensive: The Ridley Plan to decivilise the working class**

Matt.clement@winchester.ac.uk

### **Introduction**

The starting point for this sociological analysis is the present – the severe civilising offensive being waged in the UK against those figurations reliant on welfare, those groups of religious followers adhering to a stigmatised doctrine, those migrating to the UK. Although Ryan Powell has written ‘the concept is still in its relative infancy within the UK and it is difficult to imagine its prescription as an explicit policy mechanism’<sup>1</sup>; 2013 has seen several mosques bombed in UK cities, the electoral rise of the explicitly anti-immigrant UK Independence Party and a government mantra, endlessly repeated, about their absolute commitment to ‘hard working families’ that blatantly ‘others’ millions of the working population – particularly those receiving welfare benefits, Muslims and migrants.

One example that really fitted the bill was the Home Office initiative in summer 2013 where they drove an advertising van around multicultural areas of London carrying a billboard telling unauthorised migrants to leave the country: This promulgated a clear racist message towards a larger figuration and was much resented by legal migrants, British-born Muslims and indeed much of the wider multicultural population, as Powell points out ‘civilising offensives do not necessarily have to rely on the receptiveness of recipients for ‘goals’ to be achieved but can exhibit more barbaric practices.’<sup>2</sup> Barbarism in the name of civilisation is a common sociological analogy<sup>3</sup> and is aptly captured in Chancellor Osborne’s disrespectful and stigmatising remarks about how the actions of the Philpotts, an unemployed couple found guilty of setting their house on fire and killing their children, told us something about the iniquities of living in a ‘welfare culture’. This neo-Victorianism – a pious civilising mission of the elite to moralise the poor whom they believe inferior – is a contemporary civilising offensive.

The governmental offensive is clearly promoting a more unequal society that threatens a far wider figuration than simply those explicitly targeted groups groups. Policies such as the unpopular bedroom tax affect the incomes of many hard-working families – peoples’ parents and their children alike - as the government cuts back on benefit payments towards the housing costs of millions. Government privatisation programmes of vast swathes of formerly public services are leading to the widespread implementation of variations on the

---

<sup>1</sup> Powell, R. ‘The Theoretical Concept of the ‘Civilising Offensive’ (Beschavingsoffensief): Notes on its Origins and Uses’ *Human Figurations* 2(2) July 2013 [open source journal]

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. de Toqueville in his ‘Journeys to England and Ireland’: *From this filthy sewer pure gold flows. Here humanity attains its most complete development and its most brutish; here civilization works its miracles, and civilized man is turned back almost into a savage.* Cited in Marcus, S. (1985) *Engels, Manchester and the Working Class* New York Norton p.66 and van Krieken, R. *societies are barbaric precisely in their movement towards increasing civilisation* Cited in Powell (2013) *ibid.*

notorious 'zero-hours' work contracts that undermine the quality and security of peoples' reward for their labour. It appears then, that even those 'hard-working families', characterised by government as 'the strivers'- in whose name they claim to be implementing these cuts to prevent today's equivalent of the Victorian's 'dangerous classes' growing fat at their expense - are feeling the impact of this civilising offensive.

Arguably we have had government civilising offensives as long as it has suited our rulers to govern populations through a process of divide and rule; by according one figuration favoured status through attribution of the civilised or established label, whilst stigmatising another figuration as outsiders to this process of civilisation. However, many commentators believe it has intensified during the last near four decades of neoliberalism. I have written elsewhere about how this process began under Callaghan's Labour government of 1976-79,<sup>4</sup> and here I examine the record of his successor, Thatcher, in carrying forward a civilising offensive against certain well-established figurations whose existence was perceived as a block on the corporate profitability which neoliberals believe is the key to social progress.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Civilising Process**

At the BSA conference in 2011, I argued that if Elias had researched the interdependency relations occurring within the industrial workplace figuration of employers and workers in the 1950s and 60s, he may have described how British Trade Unions – in particular the networks of shop stewards that represented sections or workshops within enterprises – conducted a complex series of compromises, organisational tasks and negotiations in their quest for a degree of relative autonomy for labour – the goal was 'workers control', the process of 'collective bargaining'. Labour jurist Otto Kahn-Freund described it thus:

*Collective bargaining in Great Britain has a special significance---at least 60% have their wages and conditions governed by collective agreements---its beginnings go back at least as far as the eighteenth century...we find that informal agreements supplementary to the national agreements concluded by the trade unions are made between shop stewards, that is the representatives of the unions in the workshop, and industrial employers.<sup>6</sup>*

If collective bargaining in the engineering plants, mines, docks and factories could be described as the post-war 'advanced world' process of civilisation, drawing wider figurations into society's entitlements – inclusion within the framework of civil rights and responsibilities – it was a process that has been somewhat reversed during forty years of rising neoliberalism.

This reversal ran counter to the sociological mainstream nostrums of the boom years – that we lived in an 'affluent society', even a 'post-industrial society', where the 'institutionalisation of class conflict' was breeding a new social consensus. So affluent

---

<sup>4</sup> Clement, M. (2010) 'The Moral Necessity of Austerity' Paper to the *Moral Panics in the Contemporary World* Conference, Brunel University

<sup>5</sup> Peck, J. and A. Tickell (2007) 'Conceptualising neo-liberalism, thinking Thatcherism', in H. Leiner, J. Peck and E. Sheppard (eds.) *Contesting neo-liberalism: Urban Frontiers* New York The Guilford Press pp.26-50.

<sup>6</sup> Kahn-Freund, O. (1965) 'Report on the legal status of collective bargaining and collective agreements in Great Britain' in Kahn-Freund, O. (ed.) *Labour Relations and the Law* London Stevens and Sons p.21

indeed that the skilled worker was becoming 'bourgeoisified' as rising living standards created an 'American Dream' moment.<sup>7</sup> Elias would have seen such conceptions as products of the 'tyranny of the present' where social scientists got too caught up describing the current phenomenon and projecting its tendency mechanically into the future. According to them, social democracy would continue to thicken its institutional grip on government, employment relations, education and welfare with an agenda of ever-wider working class entitlement to equalising levels of income, education, status and expectations.

In the 1950s and 1960s, observers remarked upon the significance of the social figuration comprising those parties who, for Elias, 'have become in the course of the twentieth century the more or less established industrial classes whose representatives are installed institutionally as the ruling or co-ruling groups.' He went on to describe the contradictions and continuities within this figuration in his 1968 postscript to 'The Civilizing Process' (TCP):

*Partly as partners, partly as opponents, the representatives of the industrial bourgeoisie and the established industrial working-class now form the primary elite in the nations of the first wave of industrialization*<sup>8</sup>

This was written in the 1968 postscript to *The Civilizing Process*, and reflected how things looked at the time. 1967's Donovan Commission had investigated the shop steward phenomenon in great detail in parliament – which seemed to represent how embedded were the interests of the labour movement in day-to-day living. However, it was hardly a consensus, rather an arena of struggle – as firstly the Labour government with its 'In place of strife' legislation, and later its Cameronian successor – Heath's Tory government of 1970 to 1974 – attempted to curb Trade union power, to no avail. Trade union victories by various groups, particularly the miners who not only secured rising wages after militant industrial action in 1972, but actually brought down the Tory government following the three-day week in 1974. However, despite Labour famously promising to 'squeeze the rich until the pips squeak' in the words of Chancellor Denis Healey – once in office they succumbed to the mantra of necessary austerity, and successfully demoralised and demobilised their own supporters in the Trade Unions with living standards falling and Keynesianism declared incapable of reviving the economy.

## **Thatcherism**

*In 1979 we could not go on as we were – Max Hastings*

*In 1979 Britain was ungovernable – Simon Jenkins*<sup>9</sup>

These are the recollections of two prominent veteran journalists who played their part in blowing up the moral panic that made folk devils of Britain's Trade Unions and their allegedly pernicious influence on social life in the previous decade. They were made upon the death of Margaret Thatcher, whose election that year was hailed as the solution to the

---

<sup>7</sup> These buzz words were associated with respectively J.K. Galbraith, Daniel Bell, Ralph Dahrendorf, John Goldthorpe and Robert Merton.

<sup>8</sup> Elias, N. (2000) *The Civilizing Process* Oxford Blackwell p.463

<sup>9</sup> BBC Newsnight 8th April 2013.

country's apparent ungovernability. But was society really in such an impasse, were the unions really to blame? It is still presented as a fact that this large figuration - the section of the working class organised in associations with their own hierarchy, bureaucracy and custom and practice – 'held the country to ransom' in the 1970s. This paper contends that such an evaluation of the *res publica* tells us much about the holders of power in state and industry and the lengths they were prepared to go to wrest control away from those representing the interests of the mass of the population.

The fuel for this myth was the industrial action staged by low-paid public sector workers in 1978-9 that became known as 'the winter of discontent'<sup>10</sup> – using Shakespeare's phrase from the unhappy reign of Richard III. This allowed the Tories to publish propaganda such as the famous billboard in their 1979 election campaign showing a dole queue with the strap line 'Labour isn't working'; a clever play on words that pointed to rising unemployment and the inability of the policies of the Labour government to halt the slide. So fear for the future and disillusionment with 'their' party combined to encourage millions of Trade unionists to vote Tory. This provided Thatcher with a mandate to use all means available to try to break the power and organisation of Britain's army of thirteen million trade unionists through a powerful civilising offensive that sought to undermine their legality and customary working practices.

On 27 May 1978, *The Economist* leaked a secret report drafted for Thatcher by Nicholas Ridley MP on how to deal with a 'political threat' from 'the enemies of the next Tory government'. In 1985 it was noted 'Thatcher's six years in office have followed with eerie precision the pattern laid out in the Ridley report.'<sup>11</sup> The plan stressed the need to reduce the power of unions in individual industries one at a time, so as to ensure there was no damaging solidarity action of the sort that had prevented previous Labour and Tory governments defeating them over the past decade. In 1979 a prominent union figure at British Leyland, the state-owned carmaker, was sacked. In 1980 British Steel closures were announced, and the government held out through a thirteen week strike before closing much of the industry. With each 'success' in challenging and defeating Trade Unions, their members' fear for their own jobs grew.

The government bolstered their position by passing anti-union legislation that threatened sequestration of funds for any strike action not run according to new legal rules. Furthermore, the 1980 Social Security Act cut welfare payments to strikers' families. Ridley's plan had argued 'to cut off the money supply to the strikers, and make the union finance them'.<sup>12</sup> Both these measures challenged Trade Union leaders to ensure that they threw all their resources behind any action by their members if they were to succeed in facing down these attacks: The government gambled that the responsible bureaucracy at the top of the unions would be reluctant to take such steps, thus shackling their ability to resist – and they were to be proved right as acts of resistance to this offensive were undermined from the top.

---

<sup>10</sup> See 'The Reckoning' in Beckett, A. (2009) *When the Lights went out: Britain in the seventies* London: Faber

<sup>11</sup> Callinicos, A. and M. Simons (1985) *The Great Strike: The miner's strike of 1984-5 and its lessons* London: Bookmarks p36

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p36

## **The police – shock troops of the civilising offensive**

Ridley also argued for a large mobile squad of police equipped and prepared to uphold the law against strikers picketing tactics. Fortunately for the government, the riots of 1981 had justified the militarisation of the police equipment, and in a way their mentality, they were now ready to forsake their Dixon of Dock Green image of policing by consent for a more continental model of riot squads – climaxing with the full-scale police riot against the miners picketing at Orgreave, South Yorkshire in June 1984 – in hindsight the decisive battle to humiliate the British trade union movement. The media coverage of these events notoriously adjusted the audience view of events so it appeared as if the miners had charged the police – causing their civilised reaction to re-impose order – when in fact later enquiries proved the police culpability for the violence that day.

Powell argues that the concept of the civilising offensive ‘can be seen as a means of addressing Elias’ relative neglect of the attempts by elite groups to reframe conduct and steer ‘civilisation’ in a particular direction...given his focus on elite conflicts in *The Civilizing Process*, there was little discussion of conflicts between the lower and upper strata of society’<sup>13</sup> The case of the miner’s year-long resistance highlights the question of what kind of reaction to the civilising offensive may emerge: Will there be a civilising counter-offensive? In 1976, the Asian women leading the Grunwick strike for equal treatment saw themselves as civilising the largely white and male-dominated Trade Unions of their day. Their actions were a brilliant foretaste of Britain’s multicultural future. These led on to the anti-racist riots of the 1980s which resisted the oppressive institutions – especially the police – whose acts of violence are still scarring and manufacturing acts of resistance thirty years later.<sup>14</sup> Despite the continuing success of neoliberal ideology in undermining social democracy, the police’s reputation as neutral arbiter of law and order has been battered in recent years due to various factors such as their persistent culpability for deaths whilst in their custody, the institutional racism exposed by the Stephen Lawrence case and many others, and the shocking miscarriage of justice by the highest echelons of South Yorkshire police as they covered up their culpability for the deaths of football fans in the Sheffield Hillsborough tragedy.

## **The forward march of labour halted**

Was the bourgeois civilising offensive of the Thatcherites successful? Many certainly believed so, but we should interrogate the political assumptions behind such a belief. For, as one recent commentary noted: ‘Seeing changes in the structure of the working class as resulting in a decline of collective consciousness and a reduced capacity for organisation and resistance has a long lineage in the post-war period in Britain, both from academics and some on the left.’<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Powell (2013) p4

<sup>14</sup> Beckett, A, (2009) *ibid.* p.363, Clement, M. (2007) ‘Bristol: “Civilising” the Inner City’ *Race and Class* 48(4), Briggs, D. (ed.) (2012) *The English Riots of 2011: A summer of discontent* Hampshire: Waterside Press

<sup>15</sup> Hardy, J. and J. Choonara (2013) ‘Neoliberalism and the British working class: A reply to Neil Davidson’ *International Socialism* 140 p.127.

Hobsbawm's essay, although formally about an earlier period, seemed to predict that Trade Union power was on the wane when it was published at the end of the 1970s<sup>16</sup>. The geography of de-industrialisation<sup>17</sup> illustrates how much of industry and the communities that are built around it suffered a decivilising spurt of closures, privatisation and the much-heralded 'transformation of work'<sup>18</sup> by new technology and new employment relations that are a long way away from the old collective agreements of the 1950s to 1970s. However, many critics have pointed out that such a prognosis – a 'farewell to the working class' – has served as a self-fulfilling prophecy for a social democratic party that looked for reasons to justify abandoning its Trade Union founder.<sup>19</sup> In fact, despite the halving of Trade Union membership from a peak of 13 million in 1979 to just over 6.5 million in 2012, the unions have not altogether gone away. Labour is not surplus to requirements – it is more intensively exploited than unused. The UK has defied the falling population predictions labelled as a 'demographic time bomb' in the 1990s and has rather absorbed more migrant labour and seen the population rise to over 60 million. In fact, as the current government's civilising offensive on workplace relations has strengthened with the growth of work intensification, we are seeing fresh shoots of resistance emerging from places often presumed to be incapable of resistance – from the successful strike against agency workers at the Hovis Bread factory in Wigan, to the current disputes against intransigent employers determined to undermine working practices in the Post Office.

This does not mean however, that neoliberalism is a spent force: Despite its transparent culpability for the onset and prolongation of the current economic decade of crisis, there remains no alternative strategy proffered by those running corporations and governments. Sociology can aid understanding and solutions to these problems if it can overcome the urge to lock its mindset within the tyrannical barriers of the present, and take a long-term view of society's patterns and tendencies. The danger of much sociological thinking is that it buys into the idea that there is no alternative to the market, thereby obscuring the degree to which previous forms of post-war governance allowed greater room for state intervention to regulate markets, and priority-setting based on models of development that aimed to 'fix' the failures of the previous period of liberal capitalism that had crashed in the West so disastrously in 1929. As Steve Hall explains 'The fact that for decades after the Second World War some states in Western Europe had at least reached a compromise with capital and shifted partially in the direction of popular democracy, economic management, political education and redistribution, is absent from the popular narrative.'<sup>20</sup>

Pietro Basso argues that today out of globalised production processes and global migration is emerging a new 'global class' – a force which can be the carrier of a 'new form of civilisation'<sup>21</sup>. Therefore, its repression and degradation through four decades of neoliberalism in the West had to be viewed as a mighty spurt – a process of decivilisation in so far as it broke up reforming figurations of interdependent parties after the twenty of

---

<sup>16</sup> Hobsbawm, E. (1978) in Jacques, M. & Mulhern, F. (eds.) (1981) *The Forward March of Labour Halted?* London: Verso

<sup>17</sup> Martin, R. and B. Rowthorn (1986) *The Geography of De-Industrialisation* Basingstoke: Macmillan

<sup>18</sup> Doogan, K. (2009) *New Capitalism? The transformation of work* Cambridge: Polity

<sup>19</sup> Aply explained by Colin Hay in his (1999) *The political economy of New Labour* Manchester: Manchester University Press

<sup>20</sup> Hall, S. (2012) *Theorizing Crime And Deviance: A new perspective* London: Sage p.176

<sup>21</sup> Basso, P. (ed.) (2010) *Razzismo di Stato, Stati Uniti, Europa, Italia* Milan: Angeli

thirty years of 'the long boom' – experienced primarily in the US and Britain from 1945: But it would be a foolish short-term judgement that ruled out the possibility of significant (and civilising) counteroffensive.

## References

- Basso, P. (ed.) (2010) *Razzismo di Stato, Stati Uniti, Europa, Italia* Milan: Angeli
- BBC Newsnight 8th April 2013
- Beckett, A. (2009) *When the Lights went out: Britain in the seventies* London: Faber
- Briggs, D. (ed.) (2012) *The English Riots of 2011: A summer of discontent* Hampshire: Waterside Press
- Callinicos, A. and M. Simons (1985) *The Great Strike: The miner's strike of 1984-5 and its lessons* London: Bookmarks
- Clement, M. (2010) 'The Moral Necessity of Austerity' Paper to the *Moral Panics in the Contemporary World* Conference, Brunel University
- Clement, M. (2007) 'Bristol: "Civilising" the Inner City' *Race and Class* 48(4)
- Doogan, K. (2009) *New Capitalism? The transformation of work* Cambridge: Polity
- Elias, N. (2000) *The Civilizing Process* Oxford Blackwell
- Hall, S. (2012) *Theorizing Crime And Deviance: A new perspective* London: Sage
- Hardy, J. and J. Choonara (2013) 'Neoliberalism and the British working class: A reply to Neil Davidson' *International Socialism* 140
- Hay, C. (1999) *The political economy of New Labour* Manchester: Manchester University Press
- Hobsbawm, E. (1978) in Jacques, M. & Mulhern, F. (eds.) (1981) *The Forward March of Labour Halted?* London: Verso
- Kahn-Freund, O. (1965) 'Report on the legal status of collective bargaining and collective agreements in Great Britain' in Kahn-Freund, O. (ed.) *Labour Relations and the Law* London Stevens and Sons
- Marcus, S. (1985) *Engels, Manchester and the Working Class* New York Norton
- Martin, R. and B. Rowthorn (1986) *The Geography of De-Industrialisation Basingstoke*: Macmillan
- Peck, J. and A. Tickell (2007) 'Conceptualising neo-liberalism, thinking Thatcherism', in H. Leiner, J. Peck and E. Sheppard (eds.) *Contesting neo-liberalism: Urban Frontiers* New York The Guilford Press
- Powell, R. 'The Theoretical Concept of the 'Civilising Offensive' (Beschavingsoffensief): Notes on its Origins and Uses' *Human Figurations* 2(2) July 2013