

THE STATISM WE'RE IN

by Steve Redhead



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‘There is such a thing as society - it’s just not the same thing as the state.’

David Cameron, Leader of the Conservative Party, November, 2005, speech to National Council for Voluntary Organisations, United Kingdom

‘Our alternative to big government is not no government –some reheated version of ideological laissez-faire. Our alternative to big government is the big society. But the big society is not just going to spring to life on its own: we need strong and concerted government action to make it happen. We need to use the state to remake society.’

David Cameron, Leader of the Conservative Party, November 2009, Annual Hugo Young lecture, London

‘The whole of the political class struggle revolves around the State.’

Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, 1971

As can be seen from the two quotations from speeches by the New Conservatives' David Cameron in the Noughties, a candidate to be Britain's new Prime Minister in 2010, the state, and all its discontents, is back on the agenda. And, lest we forget its importance, Louis Althusser reminded us forty years ago that we ignore the political class struggle around the state at our peril. As we ask the question 'what would new thinking for social, political and cultural theory *after* the crash (Cruddas and Rutherford, 2009) look like?', the nature of the role and function of the state in 21st century society looms large once again. Will we, in the next decade, the Tens, revive the thinkers, and thought, of the past with regard to these crucial issues? Will Marx, or Althusser, or Keynes, or Beveridge suddenly become fashionable again as we hurtle back to the conditions of the 1930s in a 'new depression' (1)? Or is it time to draw a line under the past and start anew? Will there be a Government 2.0 or State 2.0 to go along with Web 2.0 as neo-liberalism, finally, deservedly bites the dust.?

The 'economic 9/11', as Nick Clegg, the leader of the Liberal Democrats in the UK, described the spectacular financial collapse at the culmination of the year long global 'credit crunch' (2) which

occurred on the world's stock markets between August 2007 and October 2008, has, it is said, effectively ended the neo-liberal era, which can itself be dated to the mid-1970s. In Britain's case, the oil price hike of 1973, the IMF intervention in the Labour government of 1974-9, the election victory in May 1979 of Margaret Thatcher's Conservatives constituted the beginnings of this era. It was Thatcher, as Prime Minister in the 1980s, who famously stated 'there is no such thing as society'. As her successor, several times removed, David Cameron's public refutation of this 'dry Tory' position in his attempt to construct a progressive, or compassionate, conservatism (Jones, 2008), and even adopt the 'left' 'Red Toryism' proposed by Phillip Blond (Cruddas and Rutherford, 2008, Blond, 2009, Blond, 2010) with its commitment to civil association and social enterprise, heralds a new era.

For some commentators, in some cases having been through 'new times' debates before, the times are 'entirely new, tumultuous and dangerous' (Jacques, 2009b). Now, we are, almost overnight, said to be, variously, living in a world which is 'post-American', 'post-liberal', 'post-New Labour', 'post-modern' (again) and 'post-free market'. There are other commentators who, while agreeing that the end of the 'neo-liberal'

age is nigh, claim that we are in a 'new conjuncture' and that 're-regulated capitalism' will have widespread cultural and social effects and consequences for 'progressive politics' (Cruddas and Rutherford, 2009). The state, which was seen merely as 'enabling' by New Labour in the 1990s, is quickly rethought as 'the smart strategic state' (3) by the likes of New Labour's original co-architect Peter Mandelson and 'the sheltering state' by yet others (4). Cameron's policy pronouncements point to a basic philosophical rhetoric of a shrunken, minimalist state. But the reframing of the state's role pervades all efforts to move beyond the contemporary laissez-faire philosophy and the dominance of the free market. The question of the state is, crucially, brought back in establishing 'the state we're in' (5) now. The issue though is more profound, and pervasive, than this; it is more than market versus state, more than market individualism versus state collectivism: it turns, radically, on perspectives on statism, anti-statism and all positions in between,

'Statism', and all of the conflict over the state and its extent, form and role, is a central battleground in this debate. 'Left' equated with statism and 'right' associated with libertarianism is a false dichotomy.

One recent contribution to the contemporary 'conversation' about the state has argued that 'with the presence of a 24 hour media that can, at its most malevolent, stoke citizens' prejudices and fuel their anxieties, the state must become more mobile, responsive and active to the needs of those it is designed to serve' (Diamond and Liddle, 2009: 42). In an attempt to think this new future of the state and society, Stuart White (White, 2009) has presented four theoretical tendencies within what he sees as political progressivism in the UK *after* neo-liberalism: namely, left communitarianism, left republicanism, centre republicanism and right communitarianism. White argues that left communitarianism 'points to a renewed emphasis on economic equality and collective action, albeit with a stronger role for civil society than in the past. Further, 'the market must be kept firmly in its place, which is not in the public sector'. Figures like the Labour MP Jon Cruddas, who have looked to link like minded Liberal Democrats with Labour pressure groups such as Compass, are cited within this tendency. Left republicanism on the other hand 'requires restructuring the state so that individuals participate more directly in decision-making'. It also 'requires resituating Labour politics in the context of a wider, grass-roots

social-movement politics' (White, 2009:20). Figures like the former Labour MP David Marquand are cited within this tendency. Centre republicanism, according to White, also requires 'restructuring the state' but in a 'much more decentralised direction; individual empowerment in public services; a wider distribution of assets; and a stronger policy of protecting, indeed expanding, civil liberties and lifestyle freedom. Figures like the Labour MP James Purnell, who has conceived of an 'egalitarian capitalism', are cited within this tendency. Finally, there is right communitarianism, which requires that 'we rebuild a strongly moralistic civil society to meet social needs that neither the free market nor the conventional welfare state can meet'. To this end, right communitarianism argues, 'we must build a new political and economic localism' (White, 2009: 21). Philip Blond, a considerable influence on the policies put forward by David Cameron in opposition, is cited within this tendency. Blond has argued for a combination of economic egalitarianism and social conservatism. As far as theory of the modern sovereign state is concerned, Blond and his followers look elsewhere to a 'neo-medieval model of fragmented sovereignty in opposition to the modern ideal of unitary democratic sovereignty' (White, 2009: 22). Predicting the coming end of the

'command and control' economies Blond concentrates on the need for what he sees as 'civil companies', with shared ownership, neither state or market oriented, and the 'ownership state', reforming the public sector (which, as with New Labour, is perceived to be *the* economic problem) in the process.

In this 'war on the state', engendered in part by New Labour's decade long anti-civil liberties onslaught, there is a need for a careful rethinking of what the contemporary state is, and what it means to theorise it. What I call the 'mobile state' (6) has been seen to encompass a number of roles: regulate, guarantee, act as a catalyst, enable, shield, act globally (Diamond and Liddle, 2009: 235-6). It has been given different labels: social investment state, active state, developmental state, enabling state, smart state and so on. What is certain is that the 'mobile state' of the post-future (7) requires a break from the old dichotomy of minimalist state on the one hand and big (or strong) state on the other hand.

Notes

1. Former *Marxism Today* editor Martin Jacques, who led the theorisation of 'new times' two decades ago, has labelled the state we are in now as 'the new depression' (Jacques, 2009a). See, also, Jacques, 2009c for the link between the 'two depressions', the 1930s and today. Jacques, too, has, crucially, reformulated geopolitics in terms of 'contested modernities' (Jacques, 2009d).

2. See, amongst others, Brummer, 2008, Turner, 2008 and Tett, 2009. The '9/11' label is still pervasive in the media as a metaphor for the catastrophic event, or 'global accident' in Paul Virilio's phrase (Virilio, 2007). For example, the events in Mumbai, India of November 2008 where hundreds died and many hundreds were injured in coordinated gun attacks was described globally in the 24/7 news media as 'Mumbai's 9/11'.

3. See Kettle, 2008. Peter Mandelson's reformulation was made at the Annual Hugo Young lecture in November 2008.

4. See Blond, 2009. Phillip Blond is Director of the think tank Res Publica.

5. See Hutton, 1995. Also see Hutton, 1997 and 2002.

6. Gopal Balakrishnan (Balakrishnan, 2009) has recalled the classical political economists' term 'the stationary state' in a world where history has seemingly stopped (again), but it is suggestive for the contemporary function of the state itself, too.

7. Futurism, in the sense that people have an 'assumption that the future is knowable' as David Marquand has put it (in Diamond and Liddle, 2009: 11), is over. What I call 'post-future' is the future.

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