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## The Death of Margaret Thatcher and the question of the media event

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## **Abstract**

This paper discusses the death and subsequent funeral of Margaret Thatcher through a critical interrogation of Dayan and Katz's notion of 'media events'. By considering the internal theoretical coherence of the notion, and some of the 'media events' that have occurred since its initial formulation, the notion of 'media events' is used as a problematic in order to analyse television coverage of the death and funeral of Margaret Thatcher. The paper focuses on the political dimension of the coverage in order to indicate the ways that the problem of Thatcher's material and symbolic legacy is established in the context of the continuation of the unprecedented financial crisis of capitalism and the attempts of the UK government of the Conservative-Liberal-Democratic alliance to manage its consequences. The paper argues that the event can be understood in terms of the convergence of a residual nostalgia for the social divisions associated with Thatcher, a dominant strategic political ambiguity, and an emergent effervescence around the absence of 'the people'. The paper concludes with a discussion of the problem of democratic politics as precisely the absence of the 'the people'.

## **Contributor Note**

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## **Introduction: The Neoliberal Revolution Will Not Be Televised.**

Margaret Thatcher's death was anticipated, and not just by herself. No one expected the funeral to be organised by the Co-Op with the Countdown signature tune accompanying the coffin into the incinerator. Its significance had been disputed before it occurred, and its announcement gave rise to feelings of joy in some, sadness in others, indifference in many. By virtue of the divisive 'structure of feeling' through which it was anticipated the event was already a contested surface of inscription. People who for some years prior to the event had objected to the possibility that Margaret Thatcher would be honoured with a UK State Funeral, and in some cases campaigned against it, sort of missed the point. So did those, more muted and resentful, who wanted it. Not just because to have succeeded either way would have fantasised the legitimacy of a State and its current and past governments and regime of rule. And not just because the expectation would have contributed to the determination of the limits of an imagined space through which its 'premediation' (Grusin 2010) would emerge. Expectation of the authority and recognition anticipated by the decision to give the funeral State status achieved both of those things, even though the event of the decision did not take place. That is to say, the expectation of State status, or status as such, reinscribed the popular form of authority that Thatcher established, as if the funeral would be one last time to oppose or celebrate the hegemony of Thatcherism.

Rather, the point was whether the funeral would be televised or not. It didn't really matter that, as it turned out, the announcement of the death was

immediately followed by the clarification that Thatcher would receive a 'Ceremonial' funeral, which had been planned at least five years before under Gordon Brown's government, and which Thatcher had approved and detailed. And it didn't really matter that no one could really define a 'Ceremonial' funeral, as most of them are anyway, and place its significance in relation to the mysteries of the British Constitution which Burke and Bagehot coded in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries as strategies of rule. As a BBC commentator outside St Paul's observed during the pre-funeral build up on the morning of the broadcast, if it is not a State funeral, then at least it is 'stately'. And it didn't really matter that the mediation of the announcement was immediately framed in terms of the existence of opposition to the State funeral option, and of the 'divisive' effects of Margaret Thatcher's period in office, as if anyone would not mention any of those things and still hope to maintain some credibility, but which may have been news to a significant section of the demographic. What mattered was the possibility that the mediation of State status would provide an opportunity for the verification of a relation between mediation, power and social belonging which was thought to have been established under her rule, characterised by a combination of advocacy of market capitalism with moral conservatism in the form of 'authoritarian populism', to use Stuart Hall's precise term, at the expense of those that it excluded by and through its style of interpellation.<sup>1</sup>

In short, opposition to and support for the possibility of State status for

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<sup>1</sup> For the classic account of 'authoritarian populism' see Hall (1988 [1980]). For the definitive account of Thatcher's style of interpellation, see O'Shea (1984).

Margaret Thatcher's funeral was opposition to and support for the possibility that it would become a 'media event', a category theorised by Dayan and Katz which aimed to explain a specific mode of mediated 'liveness' as ritual and the social and political relations through which it both occurs and is established (1992). Within Dayan and Katz's terms, a 'media event' occurs when authority, mediation and social belonging coincide through the performance of ritual. This paper sets out from the claim that opposition to and support for Thatcher's funeral as the possibility of 'media event' installed a fantasy of the relation between authority, mediation and the social described in Dayan and Katz's approach to 'media events' insofar as it supposed the sanctity of the ritual of social belonging, and that the political dimension of the fantasy was residual, rather than dominant or emergent. In effect, what was anticipated by opposition to and support for the status of Thatcher's funeral was the return of a political imaginary that had already dissolved at least as far back as the defeat of Thatcher by her own Party because her continuation in office raised the possibility of middle-class revolt. On the contrary, the fantasy of the dominant, installed in its anticipation and management of Margaret Thatcher's death, supports the avoidance of such a coincidence not simply from an imperative to marginalise division, but from the recognition that its relation to the legacy of Thatcherism had become a divisive issue which could escalate within such a politically charged moment. The antagonistic potential concerned the question of the continuation of Thatcherism as both cause of and solution to a financial and economic crisis which had become structural, and the dissolution of the moral

conservatism that had provided popular consent to the hegemony of Thatcherite political economy through which a new relation between state, society and economy was condensed in 'the People'.

In short, the death of Margaret Thatcher did not present the sort of opportunity for David Cameron, the UK Prime Minister and leader of the Conservative Party in an uncomfortable alliance with the Liberal-Democrat Party, that former Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair had grabbed in 1997 to exploit the unprecedented popular response to the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, when he appropriated Julie Burchill's phrase to stage an identification with 'the people's Princess'. Yet that does not mean that the notion of 'media event' should be abandoned. After all, something happened. To discuss what that might be the interpretation of the death and funeral of Margaret Thatcher is derived from working through the notion of 'media event' as a problematic in Althusser's sense of a theoretical and ideological framework, rather than a benchmark or template. The aim of doing so is to identify the event of contingency within the planned event in order to indicate the presence of the dominant in the absence of any coincidence of authority, mediation and social belonging. Although it's too soon to conduct a full analysis, and it may in principle be impossible to determine the space of the event by virtue of its multiple and conflicting mediations that emerged as a consequence of the internet, it is possible to at least identify the play of contingency, the event as unplanned, in the relatively limited context of broadcast television. To establish a framework for analysis the paper begins with a discussion of the category of 'media event' as a problematic and concludes with a

discussion of the modality of dominant power.

### **The 'media event' problematic**

For Dayan and Katz 'Media events' are loosely understood as performatives, in the sense of the term introduced by Austin's Speech Act Theory (Austin 1962), in which their perlocutionary force 'consecrates' a condensed and over-determined relation of authority, social belonging and mediation in the moment of the event itself. Although events will subsequently get more complicated to the point of stretching the theoretical and empirical coherence of the category, for Dayan and Katz the defining characteristic of a 'media event' is that the normal schedule of television, its 'flow' in Williams's term, is interrupted and suspended and a planned and managed event is televised which creates and retroactively reflects social cohesion and consensus. Opposition to the event is included within that state of affairs as it is caused by the event itself. That is to say, there is a consensus regarding the significance of the event which allows for positive and negative positions in relation to it. There is a political dimension to the theory which supports that approach to consensus. Even though authority is conceived in terms of Weber's classical distinction between legal, traditional and charismatic, Dayan and Katz tend to exclude full-scale totalitarian mediations of power from the category of 'media event' which are located within the qualitatively different filmic order of 'spectacle'. 'Media events' occur in capitalist democratic pluralist social formations with relatively autonomous national broadcast media institutions. Thus 'media events' perform 'loyalty', not to a specific regime as such, but to the

'integrity' of the event which a regime is obliged to observe if it is to benefit from it, and which the materiality of mediation, the recording and transmission devices, the scripts and procedures, the commentary, is equally obliged to observe if the performance is to be 'felicitous', to use Austin's term.

They do so because 'media events' mediate a specific form of social activity, ritual, which for Dayan and Katz affirms, if not creates, the coincidence of authority and social belonging. In elaborating the category Dayan and Katz draw support from a Durkheimian sociology of religion which explains social membership as religious membership, not with respect to shared revelation or belief, or agreed rational theology, but to participation in ritual. For Durkheim, religion is fundamentally a social phenomenon, the institution of society's belonging with itself (2008 [1912]). By virtue of the historical persistence of forms of organised social action that can be classified as ritual, Dayan and Katz claim a substantial continuity between Durkheim's interpretations of evidence provided by 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial anthropology and television. Through the televised mediation of ritual audiences become the social and participate in a subjective and subjunctive commitment to the institutions that ritual supports, including the institutions of television itself. Hence through mediation a standard anthropological object is modernised. The mediation is new, the event itself is not, and must not be for the effects in which authority and social belonging coincide to be successful. The important thing is that the ritual 'sacralises' the relation between authority and social belonging, and mediated observation of the ritual and participation in it performs the social. The purpose of its mediation is to



transform viewers into participants which is achieved through a delicate process of negotiation between the technologies and institutions of mediation, the performers of the event, and social authority. Hence Dayan and Katz provide a social theory of media which is, at the same time, a theory of the social under conditions of modern technological mediation.

Even before Dayan and Katz codified it the notion of 'media event' had attracted a significant body of theoretical and empirical criticism, as they rely on Shils and Young's interpretation of the coronation of UK queen Elizabeth II in 1953 as the paradigmatic media event in which the force of Durkheimian 'effervescence' secures social commitment to consensus and moral unity and dissolves the egoistic boundaries of the individual and fuses them with community, thus overcoming anomie (Shils and Young 1953). Birnbaum (1955) ridiculed the claim on the empirical grounds that by 1953 the UK monarchy had no authority to sacralise anything and that society does not possess a moral unity. Although Birnbaum's argument may have been correct in its own terms it rather misses the point in that Shils and Young attempted to explain the production of symbolic effects, and thus a different order of reality than Birnbaum was concerned with (who would probably deny its existence). That is to say, Birnbaum's critique dismisses the phenomenon itself. It doesn't explain what happened. Something like 'moral unity' may exist even if individuals deny in practice what they would otherwise affirm through, and as a condition of, social belonging. Moral unity, a symbolic effect, is not the same thing as moral consistency, a metaphysical ideal. That is because its force is, precisely, symbolic, but no less

real and material for that, and because it is an effect, an artifice (a 'social fact' in Durkheimian terms). Hence the link between authority, mediation and social belonging rests on the possibility of symbolic efficacy materialised in ritual, whether that is understood in Durkheimian terms, or through their development and transformation in Lévi-Strauss, Lacan or Baudrillard, to name three familiar theoretical approaches derived from them.

Couldry's recent immanent and sympathetic critique of Dayan and Katz's explanation of the category of 'media event' is helpful in drawing out its contours as a problematic (2012). On the one hand, Couldry deepens the logic of Dayan and Katz's approach by claiming that, with respect to the UK monarchy in particular, mediation has altered the basis of all collective institutions such that they are dominated by logics of mediation such as celebrity (as if previously monarchy and power in general were innocent of the characteristics conventionally attributed to celebrity). In that respect, within the confines of Dayan and Katz's Durkheimian approach, mediation is constitutive of the symbolic order, and in particular the binary categories and classifications through which social reality is determined and organised. Yet on the other hand, as a consequence of that, 'media events' occur within a set of relations which mediation itself has transformed since the claims of Shils and Young and Dayan and Katz were made. Mediation no longer subordinates itself to and reflects a pre-existing consensus on values, moral or otherwise, but universalises a plurality of values which exist 'in practice' (Couldry 2012: 63-5). In other words, for Couldry the authority of mediation has grown at the expense of ritual and social belonging.

Hence the notion of ritual is subordinate to media ritual as 'social forms that naturalize media's consistent will-to-power, that is, media's claim to offer privileged access to a common reality to which we must pay attention' (66). The effect of that collective compulsion is the production of 'the myth of the mediated centre' (67). And whereas the Durkheimian interpretation of colonial anthropology which universalises the truth of rituals as satisfactions of 'basic human needs for order' is valid in explanations of the effects of the mediation of ritual which Dayan and Katz provide, this is no longer the case and 'media events' are no longer justifiable in those terms, and thus no longer justifiable as such. Yet for Couldry the relation between mediation, ritual and social belonging remains understood in Durkheim's anthropological terms.

Couldry supports that account by arguing that the purpose of Dayan and Katz's theory was to demonstrate the persistence of pre-modern 'mechanical solidarity' in modern societies through 'festive viewing'. For Couldry, the social rituals that supported that are now properties of mediation itself. 'Media rituals' now evidence a transformation of 'media events' and require their revised definition as 'those large-scale event-based media focused narratives where *the claims* associated with the myth of the mediated centre are particularly intense' (79: original emphasis). By drawing on Dayan and Katz and their associates own criticism of the notion of 'media events', Couldry explains this transformation with respect to two 'media events'; the death of Princess Diana in 1997, and 9/11 in 2001. Somewhat surprisingly, the former is still explained within the terms of the category of 'media events', the latter is not. In principle, the transformation is

attributed to a growth in the interruption of media schedules which do not produce effects of social integration, the use by political actors of the features of 'media events' to produce 'a new type of symbolic politics' which exploits monopoly mediation, and the generalisation of the rhetorics of 'media events' across fragmented audiences (78-9). Although subjective-subjunctive effects where individuals commit to a common 'as if' through the 'effervescence' of social belonging still occur as a consequence of mediation, in general these occur in relation to 'spectacle'. Indeed, Couldry concludes that 'one of the most fundamental political struggles of our age' is organised around the issue of control over 'the central capacity, and resources for, spectacle' (80). That is to say, Couldry maintains the possibility that some spectacles will produce good mechanical social benefits.

Couldry's affirmation of the explanatory power of the theoretical framework that establishes 'media events' within a series of historical transformations that exceed it reveals a number of tensions within the problematic. The notion of ritual remains central but its explanatory power rests on the assumption that it was once socially effective in producing 'mechanical solidarity', then against Durkheim's own expectations of increased anomie somehow revived with the advent of technological mediation, and then declined at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century through its appropriation by mediation itself. It is as if in some prelapsarian state rituals were good and authentic, but now they are banal. It's probably significant that a discussion of the fate of 'organic solidarity' is absent from the theorisation of 'media events'. In any event, reliance on the notion of ritual and its Durkheimian interpretation is

question – begging. After all, who is to say that the activities 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial anthropologists documented are robust enough to support the notion of ‘mechanical solidarity’? The category could as easily be understood as a projection of a mythical past in order to displace contemporary problems of social explanation. Or, equally, the contemporary mediation of ritual may be the actual form of ‘mechanical solidarity’, creating something that never existed previously? By assuming social belonging as fact Couldry’s account marginalises the occurrence of divisions in the social itself, as if the social was an eternal moral substance that is occasionally corrupted by the exterior forces of power and mediation. In short, Couldry remains within the terms of Dayan and Katz’s argument which establishes an ideal theoretical object that is only verified in a limited number of cases which demonstrate functional control over its component parts. Because of theoretical tensions in the category of ‘media events’ it is not sufficiently robust to comprehend exceptions which are more common empirically. Instead, these are attributed to historical transformations in order to maintain the adequacy of the problematic. History is thus a fall from grace that introduces the political into the social.

In fact, the significance that orthodox ‘media events’ theory attributes to those transformations can be disputed, not least because they condition the character of the ‘media event’ that the death of Margaret Thatcher became. No one would disagree that the death and funeral of Princess Diana in 1997 was something of a game-changer. All the elements of Dayan and Katz’s theory were there, but not in the ways that were expected (e.g. Dayan 2001; Scannell 1999). This was because the

extraordinary unscripted and unplanned dimension of the event, in which a popular mass appeared through the spectacle of its own effervescence, created and dominated the ritual that consecrated an experience of social belonging and subjective-subjunctive affect which, despite volumes of research, remains obscure. Thus the issue becomes one of the limits of control and intention or illocutionary force, which can become comical. Marriot (2001) described how the attempt to televise the total solar eclipse over the UK in 1999 was, perhaps not unexpectedly, undermined by poor weather conditions which reduced visibility such that the event became the problem of its own mediation. Something similar occurred with the mediation of the UK Queen’s Jubilee extravaganza in 2012. More critically, the issue of illocutionary force introduces a more radical sense of event which appeared through the mediation of 9/11. In fact, as event 9/11 is its own mediation. Yet it would be hard to deny that it produced effervescent effects of social belonging which have had unprecedented consequences. Not only has that obliged Dayan and Katz to question the existence of the conditions under which their own ideal of the ‘media event’ can be performed but not, unfortunately, the theoretical framework that supports it (Dayan 2010; Katz and Liebes, 2010).<sup>2</sup> 9/11 also re-activated the issue of the event as the limit of the control of mediation established by Doane (1990) and Mellencamp (1990), and thus of the limit of the relation between temporality and the symbolic that mediation establishes. But there is a further limit to the orthodox account of ‘media events’.

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<sup>2</sup> For an analysis of 9/11 that moves out of the orthodox ‘media events’ frame see Bouvier (2005).



Because it relies on a formal account of the existence of capitalist liberal-pluralist democracy, which, incidentally, has been discredited since Lukes's classic account of power (2004 [1974]), it neglects the political relation between the symbolic dimension and ideology. Taking those questions as a limit, and putting the Durkheimian problematic of 'media events' under erasure, it is possible to show in the analysis of the mediation of the death of Margaret Thatcher the occurrence of a different, temporal order of event in which the ideological fantasy of the dominant reveals itself.

### **Thatcher and the symbolic**

Thatcher's death was not only anticipated at the organisational level. It had already occurred in the political relation between the symbolic and the ideological. In part that is a consequence of a transformation of the Thatcher image through, for example, Meryl Streep's Oscar winning performance as *The Iron Lady* (2012) where Thatcher is portrayed as a combination of coy and beguiling 1950s suburban housewife and smart political operator who took on the rogues and spivs in the Conservative Party establishment and won. But it is also part of a reconfiguration of the place of Thatcher's historical significance in the mediation of the dominant political economy. For example, Smith (2013) has shown how explanations of the UK sumptuary riots of August 2011 rested on comparisons with the 1981 riots (the period from 1980 to 1985, by and large excluding the Miner's Strike). Across the political spectrum Smith found, through the analysis of print media, a general consensus that the Thatcher riots had been justified and were a good thing, with the right attempting to establish that the 2011

riots were discontinuous with that, and the left attempting to establish continuity in order to retrieve some sort of political value. More broadly, the political significance of Thatcher within the idiom of 'media events' had been framed by the opening and closing ceremonies of the London 2012 Olympics. Thatcher was omitted from what was a celebration of Britishness that avoided colonialism, imperialism and military conquest and affirmed a notion of social progress centred on the achievements of the working class, the Welfare State, science and engineering, popular culture and multiculturalism. Famously, the UK Queen became a participant in the event as she performed a mediated fantasy of herself.<sup>3</sup>

The omission was initially, but indirectly challenged by the emergence of a theme during the construction of the script that accompanied the continuous news coverage of the announcement of Thatcher's death. This was the claim, from former comrades and adversaries, that Thatcher had been 'Britain's greatest peace-time Prime Minister'. Thus, at 14:10 on BBC News 24 Charles Moore, Thatcher's biographer, claimed that she had 'cured the British disease'. At 14:57 former Liberal – Democrat leader Paddy Ashdown, speaking from location, proclaimed Thatcher as 'The greatest Prime Minister of our age'. At 15:04 the BBC's chief political correspondent, Norman Smith, speaking from Downing St, summarised Thatcher's political contribution in terms of changing 'the political landscape' and moving the political consensus to the right in order to 'reinvent Britain as an entrepreneurial nation'. Tributes in similar terms also

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<sup>3</sup> For discussions of the London 2012 Olympics, see Branston (2012), Rowe (2012), Miah (2012) and Sambrook (2012).

came from Nick Clegg, leader of the Liberal Democrats, and Alex Salmond, Scotland's First Minister and leader of the Scottish Nationalist Party. According to John Major, the successor to Thatcher as Conservative Prime Minister, she 'made the wind, instead of being bent by it', and in the process 'changed Britain's perception of herself' (15:42). Of course, under the circumstances such responses are understandable, yet they indicate the problem of a strategic rehabilitation of Thatcher in a context where claims for the impact of her legacy are more complicated.

Apart from a commitment to maintaining a distribution and allocation of wealth and resource that Thatcherism established the relation of the dominant to its legacy is not one that could be characterised as fidelity. More decisively, it would be misleading to assume that the consensus that sustains that could be understood as a continuation of the sort of hard-boiled no-nonsense common-sense associated with Thatcher's popular reputation. Thatcher's economic philosophy may have legitimated a transformation within the political economy but it did not describe it. The UK economy is not characterised either by free-markets or increased productivity, which is why 'business' continues to moan, disingenuously, about their absence. The last thing individual capitalists want is a free-market, unless it is to their individual advantage, and would prefer a greater share of existing economic value without the trouble of producing more of it. The UK economy enjoys a greater resemblance to a decadent Mercantilist rentier economy than heroic Capitalism, with the production of wealth the result of a process through which capital is transferred from State to quasi-market, which in effect 'becomes state'. That

process is accompanied by the growth of a financial strata which secures itself through the proliferation of trades in credit and debt which has become embedded in the economic experience of everyday life, and, servicing all that, the growth of an enormous non-productive sharp-elbowed middle-class engaged in continuous processes of measuring, auditing and re-organising, or 'value skimming', to use Erturk et al's phrase (2007), creating an enormous 'subaltern archipelago' as Hall, Massey and Rustin put it (2013: 16) which cuts through where the public-private distinction was formerly supposed to be. Meanwhile, an underclass has become both structural and affordable, and a working-class clings on to its traditional trades in the face of an expanded labour market introduced through immigration in order to create anxiety around the depression of wages. That is because the market is a political tool, something the dominant does to the dominated in order to remove guarantees and introduce the discipline of uncertainty. It is not what the dominant does to itself. It would be tempting to read the tears shed by George Osborne, the Conservative – Liberal Democratic Alliance Chancellor of the Exchequer, caught by the camera during a personal moment at the funeral service at St Paul's, in that light.

There is another dimension of Thatcher's symbolic value that was commemorated in the tributes that followed the announcement of her death that was also difficult to elevate to a legacy. Within the conventional and technological limits of television the announcement of the death of Margaret Thatcher quickly settled into a managed and obviously prepared process of mediation. Although the announcement was not delivered with shock and surprise, it was conducted through tones that would

convey sufficient reverence and gravity. Television established a distance from the event by immediately delivering a script which located the significance of Thatcher in the historical past. Thatcher was presented as epochal from a position of historical distance. Above all, Thatcher's significance was established in terms of the divisiveness that her mode of governing had created. This was achieved through looped footage of the signature moments of Thatcher's political career as Prime Minister, such as the 'Lady's not for turning' speech at the 1980 Conservative Party Conference which established a reputation for resolution, the announcement of the surrender of Argentina after its invasion of the Falklands/Malvinas in 1982, the bombing of the Grand Hotel in Brighton during the Conservative Party conference by the IRA in 1984, and Thatcher's emotional exit from 10 Downing Street in 1990. These were montaged with, for example, footage of the IRA hunger strikes in 1980 and 81, mounted police charges during the 1984-85 Miner's Strike, the poll tax riots in Trafalgar Square in 1990, and reminiscences from former colleagues and opponents. Although often critical, Thatcher's divisive and antagonistic character was praised as a virtue by some. Thus, according to John Major (BBC News 24: 15:42) 'Margaret was at her best when she had a definite enemy and a definite goal', although Paddy Ashdown had earlier remarked that Thatcher was 'lucky in her enemies', a point reiterated in similar terms by Ken Clarke, a former Conservative Chancellor. One of those enemies, Ken Livingstone, former Labour leader of the Greater London Council which Thatcher abolished, declared that he had 'immense respect ... because she didn't care whether people liked her' and conceded that she had won 'the ideological debate' (15:52). Later Lord

McAlpine, heir to the McAlpine construction empire and former Treasurer of the Conservative Party, defended Thatcher's divisiveness by observing that 'the minority occasionally has to suffer' (16:56).

This emphasis on antagonism and division was also celebrated by Slavoj Žižek in a personal tribute, published in the *New Statesman* on the 17<sup>th</sup> April, where he announced that:

a Master is needed to pull individuals out of the quagmire of their inertia and motivate them towards a self-transcending emancipatory struggle for freedom. What we need today, in this situation, is a Thatcher of the left: a leader who would repeat Thatcher's gesture in the opposite direction, transforming the entire field of presuppositions shared by today's political elite of all main orientations. (Žižek 2013)

Of course, Žižek's kitsch Schmittianism makes the classic error of not learning from defeat by mimicking what is imagined as the reason for the victory of the enemy. That is to say, Žižek wants to engage on a field prior to its transformation, rather than the field as constituted in the present. The analysis of a short engagement between two commentators within the mediated flow of the announcement of Thatcher's death indicates why Žižek's left-wing fageyism won't be satisfied any time soon. It occurs during the coverage on Sky News, which has an added significance as it is a channel that emerged from Thatcher's deregulation of telecommunications and broadcasting in the 1980s, and is largely owned by News International, which in turn is largely owned by Rupert Murdoch who, as owner of the Sun tabloid

newspaper is generally regarded as having contributed to the political realignment of the UK working class in securing Thatcher's election and period in office. In fact, although the Sky News coverage shared many of the images and contributors that appeared on BBC News 24 it gave greater emphasis to recalling the social divisions that emerged during the Thatcher era. Thus footage of yuppies drinking champagne, the television adverts for shares in the privatised utility industries, and the Duran Duran Rio video is montaged with footage of the unemployed, striking miners and the satirical Thatcher sketches on Spitting Image. At 17:23 Sky broadcast a statement from Gerry Adams, President of Sinn Fein from outside his house in Northern Ireland, denouncing Thatcher. It is in that context, at approximately 14:29, that Adam Boulton, Sky's political editor, discussed Thatcher's legacy in the studio with Kelvin McKenzie, editor of the Sun from 1981-1994. The topic turns to Murdoch's editorial involvement with the Sun in support of Thatcher, which McKenzie denies, but defends Murdoch in Thatcherite terms as an opponent of the status quo. According to McKenzie David Cameron is adrift from the Conservative Party, which remains Thatcherite. After the interlude of a terse tribute from Neil Kinnock, defeated former leader of the Labour Party, Boulton introduces Matthew Parris speaking on location from a screen behind him, a former correspondence secretary to Thatcher and Conservative MP between 1979-1986, and currently a TV presenter and journalist-at-large in a civil partnership with David Cameron's speech writer. Initially Parris endorses McKenzie's approach, recalling that Thatcher 'broke the will of the Trade Union movement'. Developing McKenzie's pro-Thatcher agenda Boulton asks Parris if Thatcher

would make a good Prime Minister now. Parris's response appears is reflective and unexpected:

Thatcher would make a dreadful Prime Minister for this moment in British history. The moment in British history which was her and our great fortune when she became Prime Minister was when there was an obvious enemy. Britain isn't like that anymore. There is no obvious enemy. What you need is ambiguity.

Boulton turns to McKenzie, who has turned away from the screen, for a response. Half turning back to face Boulton, and semi-apoplectic, McKenzie adopts a Žižekian position, insisting that 'what we need is less ambiguity'. The scene dramatizes the symbolic significance of Thatcherism in the context of her death. Like McKenzie, Thatcher had done the work the benefits of which Blair and Cameron have been able to appropriate. Parris simply names this position of the enemy as ambiguity. It is the quality that provides advantage for those who seek to benefit from a mobile environment. Although fleeting, lost in the churn of television flow, it is one of the few decisive political moments within the event of mediation, an event, in the sense of being unanticipated, within the planned event of mediation and the script through which it developed. It indicates the terrain on which the political is constituted after Thatcher's revolutionary rupture.

### **The event of the non-event**

The association between Thatcher and social division emerged as the dominant theme in the week between the



announcement of the death of Thatcher and the funeral at St Paul's. Television broadcast pre-recorded interviews with eulogists and critics and despatched its reporters to the regions of the UK which had still not recovered from the devastation of industrial production in the 1980s. Reporters reported plans to hold street parties in celebration of Thatcher's death. With all the resources of time-space compression a campaign had started to download the song 'Ding Dong The Witch is Dead', from the Wizard of Oz, to make it number 1 in the charts. The idea was to achieve something like what happened in 1977 when 'God Save The Queen' by notorious punk band The Sex Pistols was prevented from occupying the top spot by Rod Stewart's morose version of 'Sailing' during the UK Queen's Jubilee Week celebrations. On that occasion it was generally agreed that the chart had been fixed in order to avoid the embarrassment of playing the record on Top of The Pops, the BBC's weekly pop music programme, as the BBC had banned it from radio broadcast. The honour increased the fame and fortune of the Sex Pistols. Hence it was hoped that a similar occurrence would produce a similar effect by kicking a hole in the symbolic fabric and enjoying the effervescence of digitally distributed fuckoffery. As it turned out, the BBC played a short extract from the song during its weekly radio chart programme. It was perhaps that stunt, and the increased professionalism of protestors that had been demonstrated in recent demonstrations, that, along with the bombing of the Boston Marathon that week, primed the institutions of mediation for the expectation of protest during the funeral procession. In other words, the death of Thatcher would be the occasion for the return of unambiguous social division.

Thus as early as 8:23 on the morning of the funeral a BBC commentator located on the processional route reported that there was 'no visible sign of protestors' and speculated that 'the hope is that it will be remembered for all the right reasons'. Later, at 8:40, someone must have been re-assured by the observation that there were 'more Union flags than protest placards, thus far, I have to say'. Even the Dean of St Paul's, Dr David Ison, had announced that the ceremony would be 'a healing service'. Footage of Respect MP George Galloway denouncing the funeral in the Houses of Parliament in full-on Presbyterian-Trotskyist style was played to add a bit of tension. Yet complimenting the expectation of conflict was disappointment at the meagre crowd. London traffic was shown flowing as normal and people starting their day (or perhaps ending it) appeared indifferent to the media and security presence. At 8:50, with the sort of desperately optimistic tone usually reserved for encouraging British tennis players at Wimbledon, it was reported that there were 'well over 1000 people outside St Paul's'. Hence at this point two stories become intertwined in the narration of the event; the absence of popular crowds, and the absence of social division. It becomes impossible to refer to one of these absences without a reference to the other, which amounts to an absence of 'the people' as such.

At 8:59 Sky's live coverage set the expected tone for the day with the announcement from Dermot Murnaghan outside St Paul's that 'for some she saved Britain. Few would dispute that she also divided it'. The effects of Thatcher are discussed in terms of an increase in selfish individualism and the destruction of traditional working class culture. Live feeds from various points on



the processional route report modest crowds and 'no sign of protest'. This was confirmed by the feed from Ludgate Circus, the point designated by the police for protestors to muster, with a handful of people gathered to 'remember and respect the people that suffered under Thatcher'. Interviewed waiting to enter St Paul's at 9:32 Boris Johnson, Conservative Mayor of London, insisted that Thatcher would have endorsed the right to protest which he linked to her tendency to 'bash down doors ... and upend elites'. At 9:39 Martyn Ware of Heaven 17 was found milling around Whitehall and explained that he was angry about the deference and had come to 'stand up for the Left'. Even when the hearse passed Trafalgar Square at 10:00 the commentator reminded viewers that it was the site of the Poll Tax demonstrations which 'had such an effect on her career' and speculated that 'the Nation is reflecting with different emotions'. With little to report the cameras focused on the world leaders and celebrities arriving at St Paul's, such as F.W. de Klerk, Benjamin Netanyahu, Jeremy Clarkson and Katherine Jenkins. Even though protests and crowds in general failed to materialise Sky continued to frame the event in terms of divisiveness even after the ceremony when Thatcher's coffin had departed to a crematorium in Mortlake and the guests had wondered off for lunch. Thus at 13:30 Sky managed to film Jim Brown, drummer in UB 40 (so named because it identified the card that the unemployed presented to social security in order to claim benefits in the 1980s), from his home in Worcester where he proceeded to denounce Thatcher. This was closely followed by an interview with John Cooper QC who had provided advice to protestors. At 13:41 Sky reported from one of many funeral street parties at Barnsley where an effigy

of Thatcher had been hanged outside a pub.

There was also, of course, the attempt by the Bishop of London, Richard Chartres, to turn things around in his commemoration during the funeral service at 11:23. After acknowledging that Thatcher had become a 'symbolic figure, even an "ism", and a reminder that the radical history of the Methodism in which she grew up included the Tolpuddle Martyrs, the Bishop proceeded to confront the challenge of one of Thatcher's most metaphysical doctrines. According to the Bishop the statement that 'there is no such thing as society' did not mean what it had usually been taken to mean. Rather, it was critique of the idea that there is 'some impersonal entity to which we are tempted to surrender our independence'. In that way Thatcher was reinvented to coincide with post-secular Anglicanism. And why not, since the signifier had floated away from the imaginary necessity of belonging? Probably something like 3 million people watched it across the UK television channels, between doing other things, waiting for something to happen.

### **Conclusion: Domination and popular ambiguity**

One of the planes of identification that was central to Thatcherite hegemony was the figure of 'ordinary people' and their defence against the impersonal power bloc of the social democratic Welfare State. The weapon that Thatcherism gave them was the freedom of individual choice. Recently Clarke (2013) has addressed the issue of the fate of that figure in the context of a regime of governing in which 'choice' has become problematic. Left to themselves individuals might make the wrong

choices. Clarke's analysis focuses on the mechanics through which 'ordinary people' are enrolled in their own self-governing, a theme in Cameron's abortive notion of 'The Big Society', yet at the same time encouraged to make the right choices. For Clarke this marks a shift from 'authoritarian populism' to 'responsibilization' and 'empowerment'. Ordinary people can solve their own problems and in doing so challenge expert knowledge. In that way 'ordinariness' becomes a simple property of an ideal experience which citizen-subjects are encouraged to become through an equivalence between responsibility and reasonableness. Non-participation in that process constitutes individuals as problems for which solutions have to be found. Political participation is not generally taken to be constructive for problem solving. That is because within neoliberalism power is mobile, a mutating assemblage that works through bricolage, adopting and adapting existing codes and discourses, even those of its opponents, to maintain its drive. That mode of governing faces a challenge when it encounters a limit, such as the contemporary economic crisis which restricts its room for manoeuvre. In that context the issue of the 'we' of the people, defined against the 'them' of the non-people, the power

bloc, is raised again. Clarke observes that UK Conservative Prime Minister Cameron and his Liberal-Democratic allies have struggled to find a popular basis that would enrol 'ordinary people' in the austerity measures that have been proposed as a solution to the crisis, the subject of the claim that 'we are all in this together'. Thus: 'This combination – austerity as a virtuous necessity, a populist inscription of austerity as shared misery, a project of structural reform, underpinned by a social authoritarianism – forms an unstable, if not contradictory, assemblage' (221). Even, in the context of constitutional reform, the referent of the nation has become problematic. The issue threatens to become particularised as the prevention of retaliation from those at the business end of the sharp-elbows of the middle class that Cameron is happy to identify with. Clarke concludes with a reference to the attraction of those who continue to 'behave badly'. It might be that a generalised popular irreverence, the value of 'Ding Dong The Witch is Dead', prevents hegemonic subordination. That is to say, ambiguity is fought by ambiguity. If so, then that raises the difficult question of the form of the political without 'the people' in a democratic regime.

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