The North-South Divide and British Politics in the 1980s

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The 1980s in the United Kingdom were dominated politically by Margaret Thatcher and the Conservative Party. She led the Conservatives to victory in the 1979 general election, before being reelected both in 1983 and 1987. She was finally forced to resign in 1990. During her decade in office, she presided over profound economic and social transformations such as the decline of traditional industries, the rise of the services sector, and the growing flexibility in the labour market (Sked and Cook 1993: 518-551). New divisions appeared in British society, leading some sociologists and economists to claim that the UK was becoming a "two-thirds/one-third" society, with one third of the population in full-time employment and well paid, the second third enjoying decent wages but having no job security, and the final third unemployed or excluded from the labour market (Therborn 1989). One of the divisions that attracted the most attention was the "North-South divide", according to which Great Britain could be divided geographically into two parts. The Northern half was widely considered to be negatively affected by the consequences of the Thatcher years, having higher levels of unemployment, poverty and social deprivation, while economic growth was concentrated in the Southern half. Although its existence was not universally accepted, the North-South divide was frequently used in the press, sometimes as a means of

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criticising the Prime Minister and her policies. Somewhat surprisingly, it was not used systematically by the Labour Party, the main left-wing party. This article will study this apparent paradox and suggest an explanation for it based on electoral considerations. To begin with, I will briefly present the North-South divide and its various cultural representations from its origins until the 1980s, concentrating solely on the division within England, before studying its place in political debate in the Thatcher years. Then I will look at how the left engaged with the North-South divide in England during this period. Thus, unlike much of the work published about the divide at the time (see below) and since (for example, Hills 1993 and Townsend 1993), this essay will not seek to determine whether the North-South divide actually existed or whether it was an appropriate way to conceptualise regional divisions in England. It will focus on the use of the divide in British politics in the 1980s, which has received considerably less attention.

Spatial Divisions: The (Re)appearance of the North-South Divide

From the early 1980s onwards, it was widely noted by academics and journalists that the impact of Margaret Thatcher's policies was not uniform throughout Great Britain.[1] Unemployment and poverty, for example, were disproportionately high in cities such as Liverpool and boroughs of London, including Lambeth and Haringey. Economic growth and wealth were more prevalent in parts of the South-East of England, as well as sections of rural Yorkshire. Moreover, while electoral support for the Conservatives grew throughout the country, Labour maintained bastions in urban areas in England, Scotland and Wales. Geographically, these regional disparities could have been interpreted and represented in many different ways – the South-East vs. the rest of Britain, centre vs. periphery or urban areas vs.the countryside. However, there was a distinct tendency to fit economic, social and political divisions into the pre-existing notion of the North-South divide.

[1] Examples of academic works are given below.

The North-South divide was based on the premise that Great Britain could be separated into two parts by a line usually portrayed as running from the River Severn in the South-West of England to the Wash in the East, just above East Anglia, or to the River Humber. Northern Britain was thus composed of Wales, Scotland, parts of the Midlands and the North of England, while the South comprised the South-West and the South-East of England, including London.[2] The North of England was at the heart of Northern Britain and occupied a special place. The following comments made by the historian Stuart Rawnsley a few years ago would have been just as apt in the 1980s: "[T]the North is much more than a tract of land. It is a reified landscape which encapsulates various rhetorical interpretations of the past and the present, of classes and cultures, and of geographical and topographical features of a large area of England" (2016: 3). Moreover, discussion of the North-South divide tended to focus more on Northern England than the broader British North – in this way, the division was all the more striking as it was situated within one of the nations of Britain rather than between them.

The first references to a North-South divide in England appeared in the middle of the nineteenth century. In 1854, Charles Dickens published the novel *Hard Times*, while Elizabeth Gaskell finished her novel *North and South*. *Hard Times* was set in Coketown, a fictional Northern town and condemned the appalling working conditions in factories as well as the callous cynicism of factory owners. In her first novel *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life* (1848), Elizabeth Gaskell had written of the state of the Victorian working class, and she returned to this theme in *North and South*. It is set in the fictional town of Milton, which was based on Manchester, and examines the conflictual relations between the new capitalist class of factory owners and their workers. Both novels deal with the social and economic consequences of the Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth/early to mid-nineteenth century (Hobsbawm 1968). The mechanization of the production of textiles followed by the spreading of the railway and the appearance of the coal, iron, and steel industries radically transformed England. Many of these developments took place in the North of England and led to

[2] See for example this map on the BBC News website: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/england/7724573.stm (consulted 3 May 2023).

large numbers of people leaving the countryside to work in towns and cities such as Manchester, Sheffield, Leeds and Newcastle, which grew in size and became major centres of industrial activity, along with the areas that surrounded them.[3]

The Industrial Revolution created the conditions for the emergence of the working class. Large numbers of people worked together in factories and lived in the same parts of towns and cities. They realised that they shared similar conditions and experiences and began to adopt a similar outlook, sensing that they belonged to the same social group (Thompson 1963). Trade unions began to recruit more members among manual workers, and left-wing parties and movements began to appear. The Labour Representation Committee was created in 1900 to defend the interests of the trade unions and working people in the UK Parliament, and in 1906 it became the Labour Party. As a result of the geographical origins of the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain, the industrial regions of Northern England became strongholds of the emerging labour movement (Davies 1996: 17-50).

The North's dependence on industry contributed to the disproportionately high levels of unemployment and poverty that it endured during the Great Depression of the late 1920s and early 1930s (Morgan 1988: 605-606). The contraction in world trade led to a fall in demand for products manufactured in the North and intended to be exported, as well as for raw materials. Even though the British economy recovered from the Depression, parts of the North continued to suffer from high unemployment and social deprivation. This was brought to the country's attention when in 1936 a march of unemployed workers was organised from Jarrow, in the North-East, to London. The following year, George Orwell published *The Road to Wigan Pier*, based on his experiences and observations of life in the North of England. He spent several weeks conducting research in Wigan, Sheffield and Barnsley and described in detail everyday life for the Northern industrial working class. Despite rising standards of living and growing affluence in the post-war period, the North lagged behind the South and was affected by the slow but steady decline of heavy industry.

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[3] Although the Industrial Revolution is generally considered to have triggered the North-South divide, some academics have noted that divisions existed as early as the eleventh century (Campbell 2004: 145-175).

The notion of a North-South divide was increasingly present in films and television programmes, which emphasised the distinctive nature of the North. For instance, much of the British "New Wave" cinema of the late 1950s and early 1960s, including films such as *Room at the Top* and *A Taste of Honey*, was based on representations of everyday life in Northern working-class communities. However, one of the best-known examples of this concerns television. The soap opera *Coronation Street* first aired on British television in 1960 and continues to be shown today. Several times per week, it portrays working-class life in the terraced streets of Weatherfield, a fictional town based on Salford. The genre of 'Northern Realism' thus perpetuated the image of an urban, working-class North, which was significantly less affluent than the South (Marris 2001).

British people were consequently aware of long-standing differences between the North and South of England.[4] These differences concerned social, economic and political matters and originated with the Industrial Revolution. Northerners often had a strong sense of the specific characteristics of their region and took a certain pride in them. Karl Spracklen has suggested that this was actually encouraged by the South. Northerners were thus allowed to feel pride in a distinctiveness which did not threaten the existing political and economic framework and the hegemony of the South (Spracklen 2016). Nevertheless, the North-South divide was not a central aspect of political debate at the time (Dorling 2004). As Mark Bailoni has noted, this only began to change in the 1980s when Margaret Thatcher was prime minister (2010).

The North-South in Political Debate in the 1980s

The North-South divide became a major subject of interest during the Thatcher years. The number of academic works that were produced

[4] Nevertheless, there was no consensus over the geographical limits of the North. It clearly ends with the border with Scotland, but its beginning is open to debate (Jewell 1994: 8-27). This vagueness was also present in representations of the North in films (Marin-Lemallet 2020) Usually, it includes Yorkshire, Lancashire and the area above the River Humber. See this map on the BBC News website: https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-32736153 (consulted 3 May 2023).

about it attests to this. They include R. Johnston, C.J. Pattie and J.G. Allsopp's, *A Nation Dividing? Electoral Map of Great Britain 1979-1987* (1988), David Smith's *North and South: Britain's Economic, Social and Political Divide* (1989), Jim Lewis and Alan Townsend's *The North-South Divide. Regional Change in Britain in the 1980s* (1989) and Paul N. Balchin's *Regional Policy in Britain. The North South Divide* (1990). The existence and significance of the North-South divide were thus common sense for many academics, in a number of disciplines ranging from political science to sociology, and including of course geography. Some academics were wary of using it as a means of representing developments in British society and rejected it as oversimplifying a more complex reality, but, tellingly, they felt obliged to examine it and adopt a position. Although he is not convinced of the existence of the North-South divide, in his book *Places on the margin. Alternatives geographies of modernity*, Rob Shields examines the prevalence of references to it in the quality press, that is *The Times*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Guardian*, *The Independent* and the *Financial Times*. He notes that it was mentioned occasionally in the early 1980s, and more frequently in 1986 and 1987 when it peaked (1991: 233-235). He seems surprised that it was not mentioned even more often. However, his analysis stops in 1987 and therefore does not include the end of the decade. Unfortunately, there is no similar analysis of tabloid newspapers such as the *Sun*, the *Daily Mirror* and the *Daily Mail* or of the regional and local press. The overall prevalence of the North-South divide in the press was probably significantly greater than Shields suggests. This is confirmed by Helen M. Jewell, who observes that it "received a great deal of journalistic attention, both nationally and regionally", and she quotes from articles in *The Times* and the regional paper the *Yorkshire Post* (1994: 1-2).

In the 1980s, the North-South divide was clearly a matter of public debate, in the broadest sense of the term. Nevertheless, political parties had a complex relationship with it. According to Tom Hazeldine, its first party-political use in the Thatcher years came in November 1980 (2021: 166). In a speech in the House of Commons, John Lee, the Conservative MP for the Nelson and Colne constituency in Lancashire, stated that new industries were settling in the South-East and ignoring the North. This was, however, one of the rare references to the North-

South divide made by a Conservative. Most Conservatives followed the lead of the Prime Minister who believed that it was a myth. For example, at a speech given at Manchester Chamber of Commerce in December 1986, she stated: "I do not think there is anything like such a North South divide to-day as some people like to think. I think there are great areas of prosperity and there are some areas of deprivation all over the country" (Thatcher 1986)[5]. She added that, "[t]he centres of the North West face many of the same urban problems as London, Birmingham or Glasgow", suggesting that the North of England was no different to other parts of Great Britain.[6] Margaret Thatcher's denial of the very existence of the North-South divide was no doubt a response to the coverage of the issue by the press. The British press had an important role in public life as a result of its large circulation figures and played a significant part in setting the political agenda by concentrating on certain issues and downgrading others.[7] The Prime Minister was certainly not responding to the Labour Party as it was somewhat ambiguous about the divide.

Although references were made to it by individual Northern Labour MPs and local councilors as part of demands for greater resources for their constituencies (Bailoni 2018: 60), the Labour Party itself rarely mentioned it.[8] Significantly, there were no references to it in the party's

[5] Source: https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106537

[6] By adopting this approach, Margaret Thatcher was implying that there were simply pockets of deprivation in various parts of Great Britain rather than right across a vast swathe of England. She was thus attempting to minimize the extent of the country's social and economic problems. In the same speech, she claimed that the press concentrated on these problems to the detriment of more positive news about economic growth and the creation of new jobs.

[7] For example, 1985 *The Sun* sold over 4,100,000 copies per day, and the *Daily Mirror* just over three million (Hollingsworth 1986: 325).

[8] This does not mean that there was a division between the grassroots of the party and the leadership or between backbench MPs and the shadow cabinet. The party's election manifestos were adopted by the National Executive Committee (NEC) based on motions passed at previous party conferences. The NEC was composed of representatives of different sections of the party (from local activists to affiliated trade unions), while local bodies were represented at the annual conferences. It thus has to be assumed that the majority of members at all levels of the party were against using the North-South divide as a political tool.

election manifestos of 1983 and 1987, the most detailed documents it produced during the Thatcher years. Furthermore, it was only brought up twice by Labour leaders during their official speeches at the annual party conference. In 1980, James Callaghan compared the situation facing the North at the onset of the new decade with that of the 1930s:

> As in the 1930s, the depressed areas of industrial devastation have re-emerged in Wales and in Scotland and in the North and on Merseyside, and this time in the West Midlands. They are to be added to the list. Last time it was the town of Jarrow that symbolised the political bankruptcy of the system. This time it is the men and women of Consett (1980).[9]

His successor Michael Foot did not mention it in the speeches he made in 1981, 1982 and 1983. Neil Kinnock, who led the party for the rest of the decade, spoke vaguely of the country being more divided than ever before, without being more precise about the nature of these divisions (Kinnock 1986). He only mentioned the North-South divide openly once, in 1988 (Kinnock 1988). However, he qualified its importance by also talking about "the south-south divide that fractures the south of Britain". He thus implied that social divisions were present in all parts of the country and were of greater significance than differences between regions. This may seem surprising as left-wing weekly and monthly publications such as the *New Statesman* and *Marxism Today* ran articles about the divide (Nairn 1989; Gamble 1987; Massey 1983; Massey 1988). Moreover, in a nod to George Orwell, the left-wing, feminist author Beatrix Campbell wrote *Wigan Pier Revisited. Poverty and Politics in the 80s*, although she concentrated on the economic and social position of women in the North (1984). However, Labour was a party, and for political and electoral reasons it was unable to make use of the North-South divide in the struggle against Margaret Thatcher's Conservatives.

Firstly, a parallel can be seen between Labour's attitude to the North of England and its approach to nationalism in Wales and Scotland during the 1970s and 1980s. Labour was ambivalent about demands for devolution (i.e. greater internal autonomy) in these two nations (Berberi 2006). The party had been heavily divided about the issue when it was in office between 1974 and 1979. Rather than simply granting more

[9] Consett is town in the North-East of England. In 1980, its steelworks closed, resulting in significant job losses.

autonomy to Wales and Scotland, it organised referenda in the two nations with strict conditions, which made it unlikely for devolution to be adopted. Many figures within the party such as the MP Tam Dalyell were hostile to constitutional change and believed that it could lead to the working class, the trade unions and the labour movement as a whole being fractured along national lines and consequently weakened. Although there were no demands for a change in status for the North of England, it can be assumed that Labour was reluctant to risk increasing rivalry between the North and the South for the same reasons.

Moreover, Labour could not afford to be too closely identified with the North and seen as championing it. Electorally, the party needed support from all parts of Great Britain and could not alienate voters in the South by giving the North what might have been perceived as a privileged position. Expressing greater support for and solidarity with the North would also have forced the party leadership into a closer relationship with sections of the party and the trade union movement that it was suspicious of. It was critical of some local councils in Northern England because of their actions. For example, the Liverpool local authority was in open revolt against the Conservative government, Manchester had declared itself a 'nuclear-free zone' where there were no nuclear weapons, and Sheffield presented itself as the 'People's Republic of South Yorkshire'. A closer relationship with the North would have led Labour to being associated with radical left-wing councils at a time when the party's leaders were increasingly endeavouring to present the party as a moderate force for change and to distance it from more radical elements in its ranks (Farr 2018). For the same reasons, in the mid-1980s, the Labour leadership was also trying to avoid being too involved in and identified with the miners' strike. Although it was a national strike, it was associated with the North of England as many pits were situated there, as were the headquarters of the National Union of Mineworkers.

Finally, Labour was faced with the limits of the North-South divide as a way of presenting geographical disparities. It was based on broad trends and generalisations. Overall, poverty and unemployment were more prevalent in the North, but there were also pockets of poverty in parts of the South. Equally, although the South was more prosperous than the North, there were areas of the North where the population had

a high standard of living. It was possible for academics to add caveats and to qualify generalisations about the economic and social situation in the two parts of England. Moreover, journalists who were in search of a sensational article that would attract the attention of readers did not necessarily have to worry about counter-examples to the overall trends. Yet politicians were in a more difficult situation. Their success depended on their ability to convince voters that their analyses were correct. However, they had few opportunities to give precise, detailed explanations. And subtleties and nuances could be lost in a debate with an adversary or in an interview with a journalist. The North-South divide was therefore a problematic and potentially dangerous concept for left-wing politicians. As a consequence, Labour's position was, paradoxically, not markedly different from that of Margaret Thatcher and the Conservative Party.

It is difficult to evaluate the success of this strategy. In 1983, Labour suffered a huge defeat nationally. In comparison to the previous general election in 1979, it lost 3 million votes and 51 seats. It maintained its position in its Northern English heartlands, losing seats mainly in the South of England (Massey 1983). In 1987, its overall results improved, allowing it to gain 1.5 million votes and 20 seats, strengthening its standing in all parts of Great Britain. However, these gains were not sufficient to prevent the Conservative Party from wining a clear-cut victory (Massey 1988). It can therefore be concluded that voters in the North of England continued to vote Labour despite the lack of references to their specific problems, while voters in the rest of the country do not seem to have been attracted by Labour's strategy.

As it was thus difficult for the Labour Party to use the notion of the North-South divide and the situation in Northern England as a means of criticising the impact of Thatcherite policies, the recognition of Northern interests and specificities was arguably displaced from the field of politics to popular culture. The 1980s saw a number of cultural productions inspired by Northern Realism which depicted everyday life in the North of England. These included TV series such as *Boys from the Blackstuff*, films like *Letter to Brezhnev* as well as *Rita, Sue and Bob Too*, and music from bands such as The Smiths. Active between 1982 and 1987, the latter adopted a distinctly Mancunian image, retaining their Northern accents when singing and peppering lyrics and interviews with

Northern references, ranging from the names of places in Manchester and the surrounding area (such as Whalley Range and Strangeways) to Northern playwrights (Sheilagh Delaney) and comedians (George Formby) who had inspired them (Stringer 2010). Images of members of the band filmed in front of disused buildings were redolent of the negative impact of Thatcherism on the North (as can be seen in the video of the song 'I Started Something I Couldn't Finish'). The band railed against the Prime Minister in interviews (expressing support for the miners during the strike of 1984-1985, for example) and took part in activities in support of left-wing opposition to her, playing at a benefit concert for Liverpool council, for instance. The music of The Smiths was attractive enough to give the band a broad appeal, allowing them to praise, defend and embody the North of England, without alienating fans in the South.

Conclusion

The North-South divide was clearly an important part of public debate in the 1980s. However, it was not a central aspect of debate between the two main political parties – the Conservatives denied its existence, while its use, even as a metaphor for an increasingly divided country, created potential political and electoral difficulties for the Labour Party. Consequently, although the North was a signifier of the negative consequences of and opposition to Thatcherism, it was not part of the party-political debate. In recent years, the political signification of the North has shifted. Most Northern English towns and cities voted in favour of Brexit in the 2016 referendum on membership of the European Union, and in 2019 they backed Boris Johnson's Conservatives in the legislative elections. Consequently, Northernness is not politically fixed and has taken on new, different connotations. For the first time, it has been associated with the right, reducing the political difference between the North and the South. The 2010s and 2020s are thus markedly different from the 1980s, even though social and economic differences continue to exist between the North and the South.

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