

‘For We Shall Prejudice Nothing’: Middle Way Conservatism and the Defence of Inequality, 1945-1979.

Prior to the 1980s, few scholars devoted attention to the political thought of the British Conservative party. In part, this historiographical neglect was rooted in the assumption that Conservatives, in contrast to their progressive opponents, were uninterested in, and suspicious of, ideology. Taking their cue from the statements produced by numerous Conservative intellectuals and politicians, most studies placed emphasis on the party's persistent repudiation of doctrine. Andrew Gamble (1974, p. 2), for instance, asserted that 'the Tory tradition is not best understood as a tradition of ideas'. Rather than constructing a coherent ideological foundation that could inform their governing practices, Conservatives, he argued, adhered to pragmatic and empiricist modes of reasoning. In recent decades, this description of Conservatism has been vigorously challenged. Eschewing the parochial conception of ideology that informed older accounts, several scholars have drawn attention to the way in which Conservative hostility to abstract ideas has been informed by doctrinal assumptions regarding human nature and the status of knowledge (Green, 2002; Freedman, 1997; Vincent, 1994). Far from being a 'non-ideological' movement whose actions have been informed solely by pragmatic modes of reasoning, the party, they argue, has privileged particular values and espoused coherent beliefs. Green (2002, p. 3) articulated this view with particular precision, noting that 'a distrust of an "intellectual" approach to politics, or a definition of oneself as "non-ideological", are important ideological statements which express a distinctive Conservative view about the nature of and proper approach to politics'.

As this conception of conservatism has proliferated, the intellectual history of the British Conservative party has become the subject of considerable scholarly attention. Indeed a number of recent studies have attempted to map the ideational contours of this formation (Hickson et al., 2005; Dorey, 2010; Seawright, 2010; Carr et al., 2013). Within some of these accounts, particular attention has been directed to the party's anti-egalitarian beliefs. According to their authors, a belief in the virtues of inequality was, and indeed continues to be, a central and unifying feature of the party's doctrine. Eccleshall (2000), for instance, has noted that the 'examination of conservative thinking in the twentieth century indicates that essential to the doctrine is not a Whiggish endorsement of prudent statecraft but a commitment to inequality. More recently, Peter Dorey (2010, p. 6) has articulated a similar argument. 'Conservatism,' he suggests, 'can readily be understood as a philosophy which is largely concerned to offer a defence, or even advocacy, of socio-economic inequality'. According to these accounts, then, anti-egalitarianism was a principal feature of

Conservative thought that informed its governing practices.¹ This article challenges these descriptions of Conservative thought. By drawing upon Michael Freeden's (1997, pp. 47-91) morphological model of political ideologies, it constructs two principal arguments. First, it suggests that inequality did not possess an independent status within Conservative thought. Its value, it will be argued, was dependent upon its perceived relationship with Conservatives' core commitment to fostering organic forms of change. Second, it will argue that because Conservatives were prepared to regard some forms of inequality as being incompatible with this core commitment, they frequently advocated policies that were designed to alleviate disparities of wealth and status.

I

Over the course of the post-war period, the Conservative party hosted a number of different ideological formations that competed with one another for intellectual dominance. It is thus necessary to conceive of the party as a site of ideological contestation rather than a vehicle for a uniform and stable body of political thought. Nonetheless, it is possible to locate a set of ideas and assumptions that possessed a hegemonic status within the parliamentary party from the late-1940s until at least the late-1960s. It is these ideas which, in the absence of less problematic categorisation, will be referred to below as constituting 'Middle Way Conservatism'.² Before the ideas and assumptions that were contained within this formation are examined, it is instructive to describe the historical context from which they emerged.

Following its defeat in the 1945 General Election, the Conservative party engaged in a process of intellectual and programmatic reconstruction. According to many of its principal figures, Labour's landslide victory was symptomatic of a significant shift of popular attitudes that had reconfigured Britain's electoral terrain. One of the founding members of the Tory Reform Committee, Quintin Hogg (1947, p. 228), characterised this sentiment when he wrote that the election 'cannot be explained on any other thesis than one of those massive movements of public opinion away from the men, the principles of policy, and the party by which we have been governed for a generation'. A similar view was expressed by the Oxford University Conservative Association. A report authored by its leading members (OUCA, 1945, p. 348) asserted that the election had been a 'turning-point in the political development of the country' that required 'a reorientation of conservatism within the framework of the C.20 state such as that carried out by Peel'.³ With the aim of providing an intellectual foundation for such a reorientation, several leading Conservatives, including Harold Macmillan, R. A. Butler, Quintin Hogg and Ian Macleod, re-examined Conservative principles. Drawing upon Burkean themes, they articulated a conception of Conservatism that could be reconciled with the welfarist ideas that had gained popular support during the Second World War. A critique of classical liberalism was located at the core of this reformulation. According to its advocates, the central tenets of this belief system could not be reconciled with the facts of human

existence. Far from being autonomous, individuals, they argued, were inherently social beings whose self-fulfilment was dependent upon communal relationships. They thus regarded attempts to remove systems of mutual obligation and authority as a threat to organic forms of human activity. And while they were firmly critical of the collectivism that informed orthodox conceptions of socialism, they explicitly rejected the *laissez-faire* argument that the market was self-regulating. Such a belief, it was claimed, had been predicated upon the erroneous assumption that humans were rational, utility-maximising beings.

This Burkean conception of human existence sustained a belief in the virtues of social obligation and an enthusiasm for institutions and practices that fostered co-operation between different social groups. Thus Macmillan (1938, p. 100) firmly eschewed the notion that communal obligations were an impediment to liberty. 'Man,' he wrote, 'has learnt that he can achieve more liberty by accepting the necessary restraints of communal life than could ever have been possible in isolated existence'. Continuing his analysis, he suggested that in a modern industrial economy, individuals had become 'cog[s] in a co-operative system of production', and that it was therefore necessary for society to accept greater responsibility for their welfare. On the basis of an empirical assessment of the social relationships that had been produced by technological change, Macmillan came to endorse a conception of liberty that was mutually compatible with the concept of community.

These ideas mediated Middle Way Conservatives' reading of the Beveridge Report (1942). Indeed they frequently praised the way in which its provisions sought to distribute risk. By ensuring that the burdens of material poverty did not fall 'on the shoulders of individual members of the community, or upon whole classes', the establishment of such a scheme, it was argued, could be conducive to social harmony and could permit the poorest members of the community to engage in activities that would develop their respective talents.⁴

Because they endorsed these ideas, Middle Way Conservatives came to adopt a number of measures that were present within their opponents' programmatic statements. Hogg (1947, p. 230) described this policy convergence in candid terms, noting that in 1945, there was an 'extensive area of agreement' between the policy programmes offered by the Labour and Conservative parties. Conservative tolerance for Labour's reforms was, in part at least, rooted in empiricist impulses. As critics of abstract theorising, Conservatives frequently cautioned against a response to socialism that embraced its epistemology. Speaking in June 1946, Anthony Eden thus remarked: 'we must not be tempted by the doctrinaire approach of our Socialist opponents to fall ourselves into the pit of doctrinaire anti-Socialism. All prejudices are equally fatal to good government'.⁵ Prior to the war, Reginald Northam (1939, p. 83) had articulated similar views. Some Conservatives, he suggested, had not been 'sufficiently careful to draw a distinction between Socialism as a reaction against unnecessary injustices and inequalities and Socialism as a belief in a political theory'. To halt the advance of socialist movements, Conservatives, he argued, needed to

resolve the grievances from which they derived their support.

It would be mistaken to suggest that Middle Way Conservatism was an entirely novel doctrinal formation, for many of its principal assumptions were accordant with, and derived from, ideas that had been espoused by Edmund Burke (1767) and subsequently endorsed by writers such as Hugh Cecil (1912) and W. H. Mallock (1908). Nor would it be accurate to suggest that its central tenets were universally endorsed by the Conservative party. Some prominent Conservative intellectuals and politicians, most notably Michael Oakeshott (1948) and Herbert Williams (Butler, 1971, p. 136), suggested that the architects of the party's post-war revisionism had capitulated to the socialist threat by integrating rationalist and collectivist ideas into their thought. Nonetheless, it can be asserted that in the immediate post-war period, a distinct formulation of Conservatism emerged that obtained a hegemonic status within the party until the advent of Thatcherism in the early-1970s.

To identify the concepts and beliefs that comprised this intellectual tradition, it is useful to engage with Michael Freeden's (1997, pp. 47 – 91) morphological model of political ideologies. According to this model, ideologies are comprised of three primary components: core, adjacent and peripheral concepts, each of which perform distinctive functions and possess a different status within the ideological formation. Core concepts are defined as those features of an ideology that determine its central objectives and whose meanings are stable. Consider, for instance, the status of freedom within the conceptual structure of liberalism. As well as informing liberals' conception of a desirable social and political order, this concept also mediates their engagement with other elements of the ideology. Thus liberals conceive of concepts such as justice and community in ways that are compatible with their core commitment to liberty.

Adjacent concepts are those which, on the basis of their logical compatibility with core concepts, can furnish ideologies with a range of additional meanings. But despite these logical connections, these concepts are, in principle at least, eliminable components of the ideological formation in which they are situated. Moreover, the practitioners of an ideology may modify their meanings and status in response to social, political and cultural change. To illustrate the status of these adjacent concepts, it is instructive to revisit the above example by describing the status that the concept of community possesses within liberal discourses. This concept can be conceived by liberals as having a logical relationship with that of freedom. Indeed some liberals believe that the individual cannot achieve autonomy unless they are integrated within the community in which they live. But because community is only deemed desirable because of its perceived compatibility with the concept of freedom, its status is essentially contingent. It thus possesses no intrinsic value and its exclusion would not, at a conceptual level, do harm to the ideology's essential meanings.

The final component of Freeden's model, peripheral concepts, are conceived as those ideational components that operate at the margins of the formation and which

allow it to engage with concrete contexts that it inhabits. They often take a programmatic form and operate upon temporary political events. We might consider, for instance, the role that the concept of planning plays within socialist bodies of thought. Though its logical relationship with the conceptual core of socialism might be negligible, it has frequently been advocated by socialist parties.

Freeden's model is useful for two principal reasons. First, it provides a way of understanding the relationships that exist between the concepts of an ideological formation. In order to draw out the significance of this feature of the model, it is useful to reflect upon an example, namely the different meanings that are awarded to the concepts of equality and freedom in socialist and classical liberal discourses. Within the former, equality is usually identified as a necessary feature of a just social order. As a result, socialists tend to be critical of conceptions of freedom that legitimate inequalities of wealth or status. An individual, they argue, cannot be free unless they possess an equal share of a community's resources. By contrast, classical liberals, who tend to define freedom as the absence of negative constraint, are inclined to regard egalitarian measures as being inimical to liberty. In their view, the equalising of wealth and status would deprive individuals of the opportunity to fulfil their potential. Accordingly, they are inclined to endorse a conception of equality that is synonymous with the equalising of opportunity. Socialists and classical liberals, then, both place value upon the concepts of equality and freedom, but the meanings that they attach to them are distinct because within each formation, their logical relationships take different forms.

As this example demonstrates, Freeden's model also provides a methodological apparatus that can determine the status of a particular concept. By disaggregating between core, adjacent and peripheral concepts, it offers a way of clarifying the significance of a particular statement or practice. Indeed it reveals the inadequacy of approaches that simply regard ideologies as hierarchies of values that can be ordered in a simple manner.

Applying this model to concrete political formations is not unproblematic. It cannot be assumed that the abstract morphological structure of a particular ideological tradition is replicated by movements that operate under its auspices. And because concrete movements are often concerned with what Freeden terms 'peripheral practices', their conceptual structures are often difficult to trace. Nonetheless, the following discussion will suggest that the particular formation that is the subject of this study – Middle Way Conservatism – broadly adhered to the conceptual morphology that can be associated with the broader ideological family of conservatism.

When conservative ideologies are located within Freeden's conceptual framework, it becomes apparent that their morphological structures differ significantly from those of progressive systems of thought.⁶ As rationalists, progressives are inclined to elevate particular values to core status within their belief systems. Socialists, for

instance, identify equality as a prerequisite of a more desirable social and economic order, while liberals award the same status to the concept of freedom. These values are also imbued with a universal value, such that they determine the central objectives of adherents' respective actions (Crosland, 2006, p. 87).⁷ Conservatives, by contrast, have eschewed the rationalism that informs such intellectual projects (Ball, 2013, p. 16; O'Sullivan, 1976, pp. 9-31; Scruton, 1980). Human reason, they argue, is a limited faculty that can, at best, construct only a partial understanding of the world. In turn, they are suspicious of forms of activity that are predicated upon an optimistic conception of its potential.

Conservatives are also critical of the notion that the human order can be significantly re-shaped. According to their ontological reasoning, many undesirable features of this order, including deficiencies of human character, are immutable, and any efforts to eradicate them are thus futile and destructive (see Law, 1950; Block, 1965, p. 7; Goldman, 1964, p. 13; Lewis, 1968, p. 7). As a corollary, they have also been reluctant to regard particular social and economic arrangements as being of universal value. Indeed they eschew the notion that it is possible to construct a governing framework or set of productive relations that can secure the same benefits within any social order. Hence Hogg (1947, pp. 28-29), writing in his influential post-war tract, noted that 'the good life is something which cannot be comprehended in some phrase or formula about any political or social order'.⁸ Conservatives, he continued, were committed to 'reflecting new tendencies and social forms' by establishing a social and political structure that could render necessary changes. Perhaps the leading architect of Middle Way Conservatism, Harold Macmillan (1938), echoed this sentiment. Reflecting on the crises of the inter-war period, he asserted that as relationships between individuals were modified by technological and social change, it was necessary for political institutions to adapt accordingly.⁹

Middle Way Conservatives frequently described society as an organism whose development could not be externally determined. When Hogg (1947, p. 29) attempted to define the spirit of British Conservatism in the late-1940s, he wrote that its adherents wished to foster 'the kind of change which should take place in a healthy living organism'.¹⁰ Offering a similar view, the joint director of the Conservative Research Department, David Clarke (1947, pp. 12-13), wrote that 'society is an organic whole in which the atoms react in all their movements upon one another and the whole is moved this way and that by the motion of its several parts'.¹¹ These conceptions of societal development were informed by the belief that communities function in unpredictable ways and are modified by the complex interactions between the individuals that comprise them. Their adherents were thus reluctant to suggest that particular forms of societal organisation were of permanent value, and they accepted that some forms of desirable change were unpredictable (Clarke, 1947, p. 10-12; Lewis, 1968, pp. 3-4).

As Freedman (1997, pp. 332-33) has noted, a commitment to fostering and preserving organic forms of change can be regarded as a core concept within varieties of conservative thought, for it both determines its adherents' principal political

objectives and organises the other beliefs and values which are present within their ideological constellations. Indeed while it is possible to identify particular values and concepts that are common to most conservative discourses, their meaning is determined by their relationship with this principal commitment. Here, it is useful to briefly operate upon a particular example, namely the faith that conservatives commonly award to the concept of individual liberty. On the basis of their empirical assessment of human history, conservatives assert that 'individual enterprise ... is at the very heart and origin of progress' (Hogg, 1947, p. 89).¹² Yet this concept's value is neither independent nor universal. Rather, its virtue is assessed on the basis of its logical adjacency with a conception of organic change. In turn, it is not identified as an end to be achieved, and it is possible to identify instances when conservatives have, on the basis of empirical observations, modified the function that they award to it.

Despite possessing logical adjacency with conservatives' commitment to organic change, concepts of this nature, then, cannot be regarded as core features of their ideological apparatus. Rather than being awarded universal value in themselves, their status is mediated by their relationship with a conception of desirable change (Freedon, 1997, p. 409). And because Conservatives are reluctant to specify what form such change should take, there are no logical constraints placed upon the nature of this relationship.¹³ As a result, these adjacent concepts can be marginalised in response to social, political and economic change. It for this reason that the Conservative party has, at different moments in its history, been both the defender and critic of the state, and why it has criticised classical liberal conceptions of liberty while also eschewing the positive conceptions present in socialist belief systems (Hogg, 1946; Goldman, 1964, pp. 24-25).¹⁴ And it is also the reason that in their responses to the 1945 election, many leading Conservatives were willing to endorse several policy initiatives that had previously been conceived as antithetical to Conservative principles.

Some scholars have challenged this description of Conservative thought. Robert Eccleshall, for instance, has argued that Conservatives, in common with their progressive opponents, identified desirable economic and social relationships that informed both their thought and practices (Eccleshall, 2000, p. 284; Eccleshall 1998). Conservatives, he suggests (2000, p. 184), are 'often as eager as other ideologues to urge dramatic measures for either preserving or restoring their ideal of how society should be organized'. Yet the epistemological assumptions that inform conservative thought are inimical to such modes of reasoning. Indeed one of the most common themes that is evident within statements of Conservative doctrine is a rejection of rationalism and a reluctance to specify desired 'ends' of political activity. Consider, for instance, Hogg's (1947, p. 12), assertion that 'the good life is something which cannot be comprehended in some phrase or formula about any political or social order'. Organic forms of change, he argued, emerged from the complex and spontaneous interplay of an infinite number of human impulses, not externally-

designed schemes. Similar views can be traced within David Clarke's post-war tract (1947, pp. 11-12). In it, he drew attention to the notion that human societies were engaged in an unceasing, and indeed unpredictable, process of change. In turn, he dismissed the belief that any particular set of conditions could be universally conducive to the development of the human personality.

Eccleshall's description of Conservatism thus fails to account for its peculiar morphological structure. As has been stated above, its advocates are concerned, above all else, with the fostering of organic forms of change. And because they are suspicious of rationalist modes of thought, they are unwilling to suggest that particular values, such as inequality, are universally compatible with the attainment of this objective.

We can also challenge Eccleshall's suggestion that (2000, p. 178) Conservatives concealed their commitment to inequality in order to maximise the party's electoral support. In his view, Conservatives, rather than explicitly stating their commitment to preserving and extending disparities of wealth, expressed their anti-egalitarian beliefs through discreet rhetorical devices. By celebrating the virtues of an 'enterprise culture' or the 'opportunity state', for instance, Conservatives drew a 'veil of discretion' over their basic commitment to inequality. These rhetorical devices, however, have no direct relationship with the defence of inequality. In fact, some Conservatives (Raison, 1964, p. 24), as will be demonstrated below, suggested that particular forms of inequality could be an impediment to entrepreneurial activity. Any absence of anti-egalitarian sentiment from their discourses should not, then, be conceived as the product of discursive veiling, whereby a universal commitment to defending inequality was rhetorically concealed. Rather, this omission should be identified as a symptom of inequality's contingent status within the edifice of Conservatism.¹⁵

Conservatism, then, is morphologically distinct from progressive ideologies. Its advocates, on the basis of their anti-rationalist impulses, are reluctant to suggest that particular concepts, such as freedom and inequality, possess independent or universal value. And rather than specifying particular forms of social and productive relations that they wish to construct, they are instead committed to fostering, and indeed preserving the products of, organic forms of change.

II

Having outlined the morphological structure of conservatism, it is now possible to both examine the nature of post-war Conservatives' anti-egalitarianism and to locate it within their wider belief systems. Here, it must be noted that a hostility to orthodox socialism obtained a prominent role within statements of post-war Conservative thought and that this hostility was, in part, rooted in a critique of egalitarianism (Hogg, 1947, p. 172; Law, 1950, p. 9).¹⁶ This critique was informed by three principal assumptions. First, and perhaps most importantly, they assumed that disparities of material wealth and status were immutable products of the natural order. Because

skills and intelligence were not evenly distributed among individuals, it was inexorable, they argued, that some would obtain greater material rewards than others. Harold Macmillan (1966, p. xviii), for instance, wrote: 'Human beings, widely various in their capacity, character, talent and ambition, tend to differentiate at all times in all places.'¹⁷ Accordingly, Conservatives also asserted that the arbitrary determination of incomes would generate social tensions by eroding the relationship between merit and reward. Any efforts to equalise incomes were, in turn, regarded as being antithetical to the organic functioning of natural social relationships.

Second, Conservatives suggested that within an egalitarian society, individual freedom would necessarily be curtailed. By eroding the relationship between merit and reward, material equality, they argued, would impede individual fulfilment. This argument was frequently deployed to defend the institution of private property, which was conceived as a means by which the individual could impress themselves upon their external surroundings (Hogg, 1947, p. 99). One of the most authoritative statements of Middle Way Conservatism thus stated that private property was an equipoise to political power and suggested that its appropriation by the state would necessarily erode the freedom of the individual (CPC, 1950).

Finally, Conservatives, as well as raising a moral objection to the equalising of incomes, also suggested that disparities of income were conducive to economic progress. According to their economic analysis, the market, which they regarded as an instrument of resource allocation that was accordant with the self-acquisitive values that were inherent in human nature, required significant differentials of wealth in order to function effectively. Once such differentials were removed, the individual, they argued, would be deprived of the material incentive that fostered economic productivity (Dorey, 2010, pp. 27-30; Scruton, 1980, p. 95). Hence David Clarke (1947, p. 24), in his post-war statement of Conservative thought, stated that the prospect of profit was an 'incentive to adventure, to the development of new ideas and to personal initiative.'¹⁸

Because they were sympathetic to these three arguments, Middle Way Conservatives believed that some forms of inequality were both immutable and, in turn, acceptable. It cannot be asserted, however, their endorsement of these arguments is evidence of their core commitment to the defence of inequality. Here, two points can be plainly stated. First, it must be acknowledged that inequality did not possess an independent status within Conservative morphology. Instead, its value was dependent upon its logical relationship with Conservatives' commitment to facilitating organic change. Second, it is necessary to assert that Conservatives did not regard all forms of inequality as being compatible with this core commitment. Consequently, they often marginalised their anti-egalitarian beliefs in order to serve their conception of organic change. These two points will now be developed.

It has been noted above that as an ideological formation, conservatism is, above all else, concerned with fostering organic forms of change and that this morphological constraint informs the status that its practitioners award to particular concepts. Indeed

conservatives' perceptions of desirable change are, by virtue of their commitment to empiricism, inherently contingent. Thus, while certain values, such as individualism and a belief in the virtues of capitalism, are common components of their discourses, they do not obtain a universal status and do not impose logical constraints upon their actions. As Freedon (1997, p. 338) has put it, 'the general test of the logical compatibility of the components of conservative ideology is simply the extent to which they are consonant with its specific notions of ordered change and social order'. When they encounter social, economic and electoral conditions that appear to threaten organic change, conservatives are thus disposed to reconfigure their adjacent beliefs, for these beliefs do not define the central objectives of the ideology in which they are located.

Such a process of reconfiguration was undertaken by the architects of Middle Way Conservatism. They believed that mass-unemployment, and the socialist and fascist ideologies that had witnessed an ascendancy in its wake, had threatened to dissolve the institutions and practices that were conducive to social order. Macmillan (1938, p. 15) articulated this thesis with particular vigour. After dismissing the argument that the crisis had been an 'unfortunate accident', he warned that 'when social evolution slows down, the tide of revolution rises'. His solution – a robust system of economic planning – was thus conceived not only as an instrument of economic rationalisation, but also as a source of social and cultural rejuvenation. Four years later, during a parliamentary debate on the Beveridge Report, Hogg (HC Deb, 17 Feb 1943, col. 1818) echoed these concerns:

Some of my hon. Friends seem to overlook one or two ultimate facts about social reform. The first is that if you do not give the people social reform, they are going to give you social revolution. The maintenance of our institutions has been one of the principles of the Conservative Party from time immemorial. The wise man who said that the maintenance of our institutions was the first Conservative principle made the improvement of the condition of the people the third.

At the core of Middle Way thinking, then, was a desire to maintain social harmony. According to its advocates, unless such harmony was secured, the institutions and practices that could secure the development of the human personality would be threatened. To serve this objective, these figures were prepared to rearrange the adjacent and peripheral components of their belief systems, even if this compelled them to endorse policies that had been traditionally viewed with scepticism by Conservatives. Indeed Beveridge's redistributive proposals were, in the conditions of war, justified precisely because they were perceived as a potential solvent to class conflict. Thus Hogg (HC Deb, 17 Feb 1943, col. 1813-14), in the speech cited above, proclaimed that in the conditions of austerity, equality of sacrifice was a prerequisite of social unity:

If we are to go to the people of this country and say “You have to look forward to a long period of self-sacrifice and restriction,” we [need to guarantee] that we shall all suffer alike [...] It is because, to my mind, the Beveridge scheme offers the means whereby that can be achieved, and not because it puts forward any particular rate of benefit for any particular class of beneficiary, that I feel it is deserving of warmer support than the Government have in fact given it.

He went on to explicitly state the desirability of redistributive activity (Hogg, 1944, p. 57):

‘The Beveridge scheme is [...] a scheme for the abolition of want by the instrument of a redistribution of wealth. There is no burking that fact. That is what it is, and that is what seems to me to constitute its very great value’.

Elsewhere, he expressed a similar line of reasoning: ‘to create new wealth and to use it wisely must be the aim of the true statesman. This, for we shall prejudice nothing, may involve a redistribution of wealth’ (Hogg, 1947, p. 184). Such statements expose the morphology of Middle Way Conservatism. Having convinced himself, on the basis of empirical enquiry, that certain forms of inequality were serving to impair the social ties on which organic forms of change depended, Hogg was willing to reconfigure his adjacent commitment to defending inequality in order to serve his core commitment to preserving the social harmony that was conducive to organic change.

Middle Way Conservatives did not, of course, relinquish their critique of socialist conceptions of equality. On the contrary, their hostility to such ideas remained at the foreground of their discourses. But because they acknowledged that some forms of redistribution could advance rather than impede the development of organic social relationships, they were willing to endorse some egalitarian measures. It must also be noted that Conservatives' endorsement of this redistributive activity was not logically inconsistent with their critique of socialism, for both emerged from common epistemological and ontological assumptions. Indeed, if they had regarded a commitment to preserving inequality as a defining feature of their thought, the architects of Middle Way Conservatism would have been adhering to the rationalistic modes of thought that informed their opponents' actions. For the same reason that they were critical of the egalitarian programmes of their socialist opponents, the proponents of New Conservatism, then, were compelled to award the defence of inequality an adjacent status within their belief systems.

Nor was the endorsement of redistributive policies mutually antagonistic with a critique of socialism, since the former, by creating a more equal distribution of resources within a capitalist system of property relations, could be regarded as the most effective bulwark against the advance of the latter. Indeed it was this rationale

that informed Hogg's (1947, p. 300) argument that 'the future cry of the Conservatives should be Social Democracy without Socialism'.

III

As has been noted, Middle Way Conservatives did not diverge from the prevailing conservative belief that divisions of social status were immutable features of Britain's social landscape. Indeed they affirmed that because talents and skill were not distributed evenly, it was inevitable that disparities of material wealth and social status would be present within a natural, and indeed organic, social order. However, they did not seek to privilege the values and interests of any particular class that might emerge from this natural inequity. Rather, they sought to construct ties of common interest and identity that could bind different social groupings together. Occasionally, this sentiment manifested itself in efforts to cast class as a negative feature of modern societies. A particularly striking example can be located within a tract authored by Timothy Raison (1964, p. 24) in 1964:

Class distinctions can be the most pernicious and wasteful means of disrupting society which can be imagined. It is not simply that class leads to the politics of envy which has marked the century; not even that it is the greatest obstacle to the concept of One Nation. The fundamental injustice of class comes when it deprives any man of the right to make the most of the talents which he may possess.

For Raison, class divisions, far from being a universal prerequisite of organic change, were instead a significant barrier to its attainment. By placing artificial barriers upon the development of the individual's personality, class, he argued, threatened to generate social tensions and impede entrepreneurial activity.

Few Middle Way Conservatives offered such direct critiques of the concept of class. Instead, they sought to locate it within the organicist conception of society that was at the core of their political thought. Indeed they frequently asserted that the inter-relationships between classes should be in a state of balance. In 1947, as the Attlee government embarked on its programme of social reform, Clarke (1947, pp. 14-15.) thus noted: 'To favour one class against another may in certain circumstances be necessary as an act of justice and a restoration of balance'. To achieve such a balance, and to preserve the vitality of the social organism, Conservatives attempted to ensure that class divisions were, as far as possible, related to disparities of ability. As Clarke (1947, p. 15) put it, 'the more that distinction is founded on ability, the more will it be bridged by respect.'

At certain junctures, this meritocratic impulse compelled Middle Way Conservatives to endorse policies that were designed to erode, rather than preserve, material inequality. Excessive disparities of reward, it was argued, would contribute to the sharpening of class identities and the erosion of the sense of common identity that was an essential component of nationhood. It for this reason, for instance, that

David Clarke (1947, p. 25), despite regarding the profit motive as being conducive to the sum of human happiness, was prepared to assert that 'Conservatives are opposed to any excessive profits, salaries and wages which are gained by exploiting the difficulties of the community'. In his view, only those profits that were compatible with social harmony were desirable. Some Middle Way Conservatives also expressed concern that the privileging of some skills over others could disrupt the function of the social organism. Prior to the 1964 election, as Harold Wilson was espousing the virtues of technocratic advance, Raison noted: 'as selection by ability becomes more exact and prevalent, so the danger of a feeling of rejection among those who are not selected will increase. This in turn might lead to serious social tensions, if the gulf between the technocrats and the rest of the community were to widen'. Accordingly, he asserted that 'the egalitarianism which characterises a good deal of contemporary English life is likely to be valuable' (Raison, 1964, p. 25). Months later, Quintin Hogg (Hailsham, 1965, p. 424), in a survey of Britain's post-war experience, echoed these sentiments:

In my childhood, the whole structure of society was hierarchical [...] The Britain of today is, in fact, though it has not fully grasped the implications, socially and economically egalitarian, far more so than the United States, and still more so than the Soviet Union. On balance the change is wholly to the good, for it has been brought about by the immense improvement of the economic strength and position of the wage earner. In my childhood under employment and poverty were the dominating factors in the position of the working class even when they were fully employed and prosperous, which was not the case between the wars. But we have had full employment now since 1940, and since 1951 the consequences of this have been more and more apparent in terms of personal satisfactions.

As the above statements demonstrate, Middle Way Conservatives were willing to subordinate the defence of social hierarchy to their core objective of preserving the prerequisites of organic change, even if doing so led them to endorse, rather than oppose, some forms of redistributive activity. In part, this willingness was rooted in the belief that some forms of inequity were artificial products of the modern capitalist order. This sustained a concomitant belief that political activity might be necessary to facilitate the healthy development of the social organism.

IV

As has been noted above, Conservatives' hostility to their opponents' egalitarianism was partially derived from a libertarian impulse. According to their empirical assessment of human experience, individual enterprise was the primary engine of political and social progress. They were thus hostile to policies that threatened to

erode the incentives for such entrepreneurial activity. Drawing attention to this component of Conservative thought, Dorey (2010, pp. 20-21) suggests that Conservatives adopted a negative or conception of freedom, in which liberty was primarily defined as the 'absence of restraint'. Yet when the morphology of Conservative discourses are examined, this interpretation of the party's conception of freedom appears rather problematic.

Before Middle Way approaches to liberty are examined, it must first be asserted that for the same reasons that Conservatives were unwilling to award the defence of inequality a core status within their thought, they did not conceive of freedom as an end in itself (Scruton, 1980, p. 19; Scruton, 1988, p. 9; Freedman, 1997, pp. 340-341). Adhering to Burke's view that liberty could only be valuable when connected with order, they frequently were reluctant to be 'led astray into the paths of unrestrained liberalism', and they sought to empirically determine the relationship between particular liberties and their core principles of organic change. David Clarke (1947, p. 20) thus viewed freedom not as an end in itself but as a precondition for achieving 'the development of personality and moral virtue'. For Clarke, then, the value of freedom was contingent rather than absolute. He believed, in lineage with Burke, that liberty was both a precondition of, and threat to, the development of the social organism. Clarke's reasoning exposes the logical constraints placed upon the morphological status of freedom. It could never acquire a core status within Conservative thought precisely because of its adjacent, and indeed contingent, relationship with its advocates' core values.

Middle Way Conservatives also eschewed the belief that a particular philosophy of freedom could possess universal value. Advocates of such a notion, they argued, falsely assumed that there was an essential unity to all human societies and that a particular set of political practices could systematically produce the same social order. During a lecture that he delivered in 1952, T. E. Utley (1953) stated this argument in explicit terms, noting that 'the exact amount of freedom which men ought to have differs substantially at different times and in different places'.¹⁹ A later exponent of Middle Way Conservatism, Ian Gilmour (1978, p. 148), offered similar views. 'Any single dominating principle or institution,' he wrote, 'is a threat to freedom'.

Implicit within the above statements is the assumption that as social and economic conditions changed, it was necessary to re-negotiate the location of liberty within the conceptual structure of Conservatism. Such a process of re-evaluation was conducted by Middle Way Conservatives from the late-1930s. Faced with the phenomenon of mass unemployment, they were compelled to reassess the desirable relationship between equality and freedom. Mirroring the arguments that had been developed by New Liberals in the late nineteenth-century, they acknowledged that freedom, they accepted that unless an individual possessed a certain standard of material wealth, their freedom would be economically constrained. Put simply, they eschewed the strictly negative conception of liberty that had been advocated by Mill and other classical liberals (Hogg, 1947, pp. 48-54; Gilmour; 1978, p. 117, p. 148).

This logic mediated Conservatives' understandings of poverty. Within any particular society, it was necessary, they argued, for definitions of poverty to be adjusted according to overall standards of living. Poverty was thus defined in relative, not absolute, terms (Dorey, 2010, pp. 98-99). This relative definition of poverty was frequently evident in the party's policy documents. Consider, for instance, the party's 1959 election manifesto (Dale, 2013, p. 130), in which it was stated that the party's objective was to 'double the British standard of living in this generation and ensure that all sections of society share in the expansion of wealth.' The willingness of Middle Way Conservatives to adhere to a relative definition of poverty was a product of the morphological structure of conservatism. Because they were primarily concerned with preserving social harmony, and because they acknowledged that this harmony was threatened by excessive disparities of wealth and status, they were reluctant to define poverty in absolute terms.

Dorey's description of Conservative attitudes to freedom is thus problematic in two respects. First, it fails to acknowledge the adjacent location that freedom occupies within conservatism's conceptual architecture. Despite being a seemingly ubiquitous feature of Conservatives' critique of egalitarianism, the defence of freedom was not conceived as a core, or indeed logically necessary, component of conservative belief. Rather, its value, and indeed form, was determined by its perceived relationship with their principal concern of promoting organic change. In turn, Middle Way Conservatives' attitudes towards the relationship between equality and freedom were contingent and culturally mediated, not fixed and absolute. Second, Dorey overlooks the contested nature of the party's commitment to freedom. Rather than being a concept that obtained a stable meaning within Conservative thought, freedom was instead the subject of considerable deliberation, and its location within the party's constellation of values changed over time.

V

Having suggested that the defence of inequality occupied a peripheral, rather than core, location within post-war Conservative thought, the article will conclude by offering some insights into the historiographical significance of this argument. In particular, it will attempt to illuminate its implications for our broader understanding of post-war political contestation. Since the late-1970s, these understandings have frequently been mediated by the concept of a 'post-war consensus' (Addison; 1975; Mendilow, 1997; Fraser, 2000). Advocates of this notion assert that from the Second World War until at least the early-1970s, there existed an unusual degree of bi-partisan agreement. Both the Labour and Conservative parties, they argue, shared a common commitment to the preservation of full employment, the expansion of the Beveridgean welfare state and the reconciliation of the interests of capital and labour (Kavanagh and Morris, 1989). Critics of the concept, by contrast, have drawn attention to the distinctive ideologies that the two main parties continued to espouse in this period (Jones and Kandiah, 2006). In their view, conflict, not consensus,

marked post-war politics.

When the vast body of literature that contributed to this debate is examined, it is striking how little attention has been devoted to the ideational trajectories of Britain's main parties. Indeed few writers have sought to compare the ideological traditions of Labourism and Conservatism in any sustained way, and those studies that have attempted to do so have been insensitive to the morphological architecture of these two intellectual traditions.

Some studies, in an effort to resolve the dilemmas posed by the concept of consensus, have drawn a distinction between the 'means' and 'ends' of political activity (Hickson, 2004). Within these accounts, it is argued that the Labour and Conservative parties utilised the same policy means to pursue very different ideological objectives. Here, the issue of wealth distribution is identified as the central source of ideological dispute. While Labour sought to erode disparities of wealth and status, their opponents, it is argued, attempted to preserve and extend them. A comprehensive critique of this argument cannot be offered here, not least because this article has not offered a detailed description of Labour's political thought. But it can be stated that such a thesis is predicated on a misunderstanding of post-war Conservative thought. As the above discussion has demonstrated, the defence of inequality occupied a peripheral role within Middle Way Conservatism, and there was no logical necessity for its adherents to critique redistributive activity. That is not to say, of course, that Conservatives did not object to the egalitarian policies that were endorsed by their Labour opponents. Its leaders frequently critiqued the left's policy proposals and, when in office, sought to reverse those which they deemed to be incompatible with desirable forms of change. Yet it would be erroneous to suggest that their hostility to egalitarian activity was an intrinsic component of their respective systems of belief. And when they encountered particular phenomena that appeared to threaten social stability, they frequently marginalised anti-egalitarian arguments from their discourse. At certain junctures, such as the early-1960s, it is thus possible to locate a considerable degree of bi-partisan convergence that was, at least in part, rooted in common beliefs regarding the undesirability of gross inequalities of wealth (Lowe, 1996).

Post-war party contestation, then, cannot be accurately traced if it is assumed that the defence of inequality was a principal objective of the Conservative party. Indeed such an assumption not only obscures the morphological status that the concept of inequality possessed with post-war Conservative thought, but it also implies that the adherents of this formation were concerned, above all else, with the attainment of specified 'ends'.

The above discussion has challenged the notion that Middle Way Conservatism was a philosophy of inequality. It has argued that because its architects were concerned, above all else, with the fostering of organic change, and because they regarded some forms of inequality as being incompatible with this core commitment, they awarded the defence of inequality a peripheral role within their ideological architecture.

Moreover, it has suggested that if they had regarded inequality as a universal virtue, and if they identified it as an end to be obtained, they would have adhered to the rationalism that was inimical to conservatism. These arguments have significant implications for our broader understanding of post-war British politics. For if we begin to question the assumption that the Conservative was principally motivated by preserving inequality, then it may be necessary to redraw the boundaries of political contestation.

Notes

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¹ Also see Jones (Jones and Kandiah, 1996, p. 3-4), Hickson (2010) and Norton and Aughey (1981)

² Some studies, such as those of David Seawright (2010) and Peter Dorey (2010), have described the dominant strain of post-war Conservative thought as 'One Nation Toryism'. Such a term is highly problematic, for its origins are rooted in a particular institution whose members articulated a vast range of ideas and values, many of which were marginal, rather than hegemonic, components of post-war Conservative discourse. See Walsha (2003).

³ Also see Astor (1946) and Clarke (1947, p. 3).

⁴ See Boyd-Carpenter (1950) and Butler (1947).

⁵ Cited in *The New Conservatism* (London: CPC, 1955), p. 18.

⁶ In the below discussion, the term 'conservatism' refers to the broader ideological family, while 'Conservatism' refers to the thought of the British Conservative party.

⁷ Consider, for instance, Anthony Crosland's conception of socialism. In his view, a commitment to equality was a defining feature of socialist belief. See Crosland (2006).

⁸ Also see Goldman (1956, p. 6).

⁹ Also see Goldman (1964, p. 13) and Gilmour, (1978, p. 114). For a perceptive discussion of this feature of conservative thought, see O'Sullivan (1976, pp. 9-31)

¹⁰ For a discussion of this feature of conservatism, see Norton (1996).

¹¹ Also see Boyd-Carpenter (1950); White (1950); Lewis (1968, p. 9); Gilmour, (1978, p. 129) and Patten (1983, p. 7).

¹² Also see Macmillan (1938, pp. 19-31)

¹³ For examples, see Eden (1955, p. 18) and Gilmour, (1978, p. 128)

¹⁴ In a draft of *The Case for Conservatism*, Hogg drew attention to this feature of Conservatism (Hogg, 1946). After dismissing the notion of an attainable and indispensable 'ideal of political wisdom', he suggested that it was not contradictory for Conservatives to regard themselves as 'reformers', 'progressives' or 'liberals'.

¹⁵ For a critique of Eccleshall's formulation, see O'Hara (2011).

¹⁶ Hogg noted that dismissed the argument that the 'true remedy [of] poverty consists in levelling down incomes to a common level', while Richard Law asserted that socialist utopianism was a threat to human freedom.

¹⁷ Also see Jones (1976) and Raison (1964, p. 38).

¹⁸ For further examples, see Maxwell Fyfe (1950, p. 85)

¹⁹ Accordingly, Uteley noted: 'there is something to be said for the view that there is no abstract principle which in itself affords a mathematically certain way of determining the degree of personal liberty which can safely be tolerated'.

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