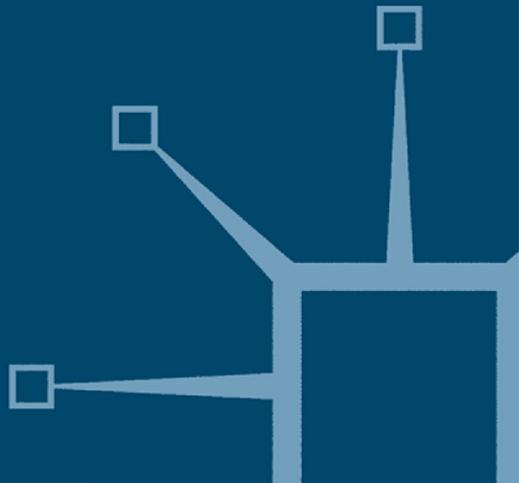# Reaganism, Thatcherism and the Social Novel
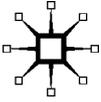
Colin Hutchinson

Reaganism, Thatcherism and the Social Novel

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To Anne

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Contents

Acknowledgements

Introduction

> An era of renewed moral and spiritual values, an era of global
> peace and prosperity, is upon us. I think that we are about a
> third of the way into this long cycle, and I believe that it was
> Mr. Reagan who began it.[1]

> There is nothing political about American literature. Everyone
> can like American literature, no matter what your party.[2]

Ronald Reagan is dead, and it is now almost two decades since
Margaret Thatcher left office. In many ways, however, it is as if both
leaders are still in power. Their political legacy is such that subsequent
administrations in the United States and the United Kingdom have
been unable or unwilling to roll back policy towards the political cen-
tre or left, and have continued to steer by the star of private sector
interests, while all but removing issues such as wealth redistribution
and social justice from the mainstream political agenda. The left –
defeated, disunited, and disillusioned – has been unable to mount an
effective, broad-based opposition to the pervasive influence of neo-
conservatism, not least because of the assault by the latter on the
public realm, and the consequent erosion of civic sensibilities and
collective allegiances. The insistence of the New Right upon the
primacy of the market has influenced general assumptions and values
to the extent that a significant proportion of the British and American
electorate – that proportion which increasingly decides the outcome
of elections – relies for its economic well-being not only on income
from employment, but also on such factors as interest rates, the housing
market and the performance of pension funds and share portfolios,
leading one commentator to arrive at the conclusion that 'we are all
becoming American conservatives now'.[3]

1

It is in this context that this book will assess the influence of 'Thatcherism' and 'Reaganism'[4] upon what has been termed the 'social novel' in the United States and the United Kingdom – that is, the novel that addresses contemporary social and political concerns more or less explicitly.[5] It will concentrate on novels published after 1979 by authors who, for the most part, came to prominence during or just after the Reagan-Thatcher period. More specifically, the study will use as its focus the work of white male novelists with a broad left-liberal political perspective who, in the context of the New Right ascendancy, began to share the relatively unfamiliar experience of feeling marginalized by virtue of their political orientation. From the United Kingdom, texts by Martin Amis, Iain Banks, Jonathan Coe, Iain Sinclair, Ian McEwan, Irvine Welsh, Alan Warner, and Julian Barnes will be contrasted with works of American fiction by Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, Bret Easton Ellis, Douglas Coupland, and Tom Wolfe in order to provide a comparative insight into the state of both nations. In addition, novels by Anita Mason and Katherine Dunn will be included on the grounds that they offer revealing perspectives on the situation of the white male subject in the contemporary world.

Most of these texts can be termed 'popular literary' because they combine a degree of commercial success with a level of critical approval that prompts academic discussion. Because of their relatively wide and heterogeneous readership, I contend that these novels indicate concerns that will almost certainly differ in their range from those shared by a comparatively determined, confident and less diffuse oppositional group or *avant garde* movement. This is particularly relevant to a study of the Reagan-Thatcher period because of the way in which, as I aim to demonstrate, widespread anxieties and aspirations were exploited by the populism of the New Right. If the obverse image of the 1980s and 1990s is that of the aggressive celebration of markets and money, then the concerns of the 'popular literary' texts examined here represent the reverse: an amorphous sense of left-liberal discontentment that may have lacked direction, unity and purpose, but which offered to the left at least the potential for an alternative both to its own despair and to the strident triumphalism of its adversaries. Furthermore, by deliberately selecting a diverse group of authors and texts (albeit within the white/male focus outlined above) that appear to have little in common, I intend to demonstrate that the correspondences between them reinforce the argument that the social novel of the 1980s and 1990s is informed by

a diffuse yet popular left-liberal sensibility that is usually suppressed by most representations of the contemporary period.

The successive election victories of Reagan and Thatcher placed white male left-liberals in a curious position, in that the latter were obliged to assess their position as members of the dominant group by virtue of gender, race and (for the most part) class, but as members of the subordinate group in terms of their political sympathies. Whereas members of other dissident, marginalized, or victimized sections of society could stand in relatively straightforward opposition to the New Right project, the white male left-liberal found himself in a situation of complex and compromised opposition rather than in a position of comparatively uncomplicated antagonism: a situation that throws into sharp relief the complex and contradictory nature not only of Reaganism and Thatcherism, but also that of the political and literary left in contemporary Britain and the United States of America. Themes of political defeat, disillusionment and impotence have always been familiar to the left, but were to become further complicated by notions of complicity and betrayal. For example, the emergence of 'whiteness studies' in the 1990s, while helpful and constructive in terms of encouraging straight white men on the left to extend their political critique horizontally beyond the economic realm in order to encompass the politics of gender and race, only reinforced the sense of culpability and self-doubt that springs from a sense of guilty privilege, and which is evident throughout the novels discussed in this book.[6] Nevertheless, although the outcome of such self-examination is often either crippling ambivalence or destructive (frequently self-destructive) despair, I maintain that the diverse crises of the white male left-liberal in the social novel of the 1980s and 1990s expose what have been described as the 'faultlines' through which the 'criteria of plausibility' of a social order 'fall into contest and disarray',[7] and that it is through the very complexity and ambiguity of these crises that dissident readings of the fiction of that period are made possible.

Ambivalence is the distinguishing feature of the contemporary white male left-liberal. In political terms, this manifests itself in a reassessment of the individualistic-libertarian sensibilities that dominated the post-war decades, and in a consequent revival of interest in collectivist discourses. Yet this, in turn, is countered by a persistent individualism that insists upon independence from what is fearfully perceived as the unbending dogma of collectivist programmes: what Alex Callinicos has described as 'the traditional liberal [doubt] that any attempt at

social change will lead straight to the Gulag'.[8] At the same time, there is a great deal of wariness with regard to pragmatism, and to the flexibility of principle that is held to accompany traditional political activity, with its potential for opportunism, complicity, and corruption. Similarly, an awareness that the foundations of liberal humanism have been shaken both by the horrors of twentieth century history and by theoretical assault (feminism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism) exists alongside a residual sympathy for those aspects of the Enlightenment ethos that promote tolerance, liberty, and pragmatism above economic or philosophical rigidity. Indeed, what can be salvaged from the Enlightenment project represents for many on the left a bulwark against the fear that postmodern theory, in its assault upon all foundations, assumptions, and assertions, ultimately leaves the left in a weakened position when it comes to forming a confident opposition to its New Right opponents. What emerge are strategies of ambivalence and conciliation, rather than assertion, that affect the perennial debates over the need for radical or moderate political action, realist or experimental literary techniques, and over the subversive or conservative potential of the postmodern condition.

Practitioners of the social novel generally assume that economic and social factors are inseparable from both the form and content of fiction, and reject the idealist notion that literature can float blissfully free of what happens at the stock exchange, on the factory floor, the battlefield, the television, or the high street. They are aware of the ubiquity of the news media; that now, more than ever, 'the world is too much with us', and that even the wealthiest and best-insulated of novelists are scarcely able to maintain an other-worldly detachment from the effects of government policies or the strategies of multinational corporations. It was therefore inevitable that the events and developments that distinguished the 1980s in both the United Kingdom and the United States of America – the miners' strike, Irangate, the Falklands War, 'yuppies', mass unemployment, and the IT revolution, for example – would inevitably become represented in fiction, although not always immediately and not always in predictable ways. What is also inevitable for social novelists and their critics, however, is consideration of the issue of 'economism': that is, the extent to which cultural phenomena can be determined by economic and political factors; and whether the traditional Marxist base-superstructure model is at all useful or valid in terms of explaining those phenomena. Ever since Georg Lukàcs, leftist writing and criticism has aspired to reconcile its insistence upon the significance

of the social and economic domain in relation to culture with the proposal that the relationship between them is far from one-dimensional.[9] In particular, Marxist theory has demanded an account of ideology: the means by which 'superstructural' ideas, forms, and practices influence, protect or disguise the nature of the economic base. For Lukàcs, the techniques of realism are suitable both for limited (and literal) political ends – the exposure of child labour in order to campaign for its abolition, for example – and for revealing the deeper realities of social conflict and exploitation. Yet, for other writers and critics (most notably with regard to Lukàcs, Bertolt Brecht[10]) the stable, universalizing model employed by realism that assumes a relatively unproblematic transcription of reality into linguistic and literary forms, is unsuitable for delving beyond surface appearance in order to expose the extent of ideological orthodoxies. Instead, it is experimental art, with its emphasis on internal consciousness, fantasy, and transgression, and its insistence on exposing the problematic nature of representation that is deemed to be more appropriate to a subversive purpose. The difficulty for engaged fiction – pursued by subsequent Marxist theorists[11] – has always been that of explicating 'critical reality': in other words, representing that which is suppressed or distorted by a dominant ideology, and appropriating it within a progressive critical context, without attracting accusations of a reactionary withdrawal into aestheticism and formalism at the expense of social and historical relevance.

Towards the end of the twentieth century, the left encountered the contention of theorists such as Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard that there is effectively nothing beyond ideology at all: no 'deeper' Marxist-friendly reality or teleology, and no stable codes of meaning or agreed set of values that are revealed once the dark curtain of ideology has been drawn back.[12] In the politically charged context of the Reagan-Thatcher period, the left has responded by attempting to graft what it sees as the most pertinent aspects of contemporary critical thought onto an account of history, society, and culture that continues to emphasize the need for change and struggle as a means to avoid that sense of political despair and 'playful' nihilism deemed by many on the left to be inherent within contemporary theory. What is notable in this is the tendency for contemporary left-liberals to attempt to reconcile, synthesize or transcend opposing views rather than to assert one view over another in the manner most frequently associated with political radicalism. For example, the work of the Marxist critic Fredric Jameson may be understood as an attempt to

'work through' the accusation (as made by Lyotard) that Marxism is a discredited and anachronistic 'grand narrative'. Jameson acknowledges the extent to which culture – by which is meant all manner of mediated expressive, informative, or recreational activity – has extended its influence throughout every aspect of life in a way that renders untenable the use of the Marxist base-superstructure model as a useful critical tool. If the clarity of a 'base' analysis is unavailable, then that critical analysis must be fought on the cultural domain. This is in curious contrast to the 'economistic' insistence of the New Right that all human activity thought and action ultimately stems from the workings of the marketplace, and to the implicitly conservative postmodernist notion (expressed most vividly in Baudrillard) that a media-saturated, consumerist culture has actually superseded politics and economics. How might this triangle of opposing viewpoints be 'worked through' according to a progressive political analysis?

On the basis that the New Right have already made this move, one strategy might be to adopt economism in cultural form. It is arguable that works such as Martin Amis's *Money* (1984) and Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991) represent a critical response to New Right economism in that both novels can be understood as more or less direct representations of the deleterious effects of Reaganite and Thatcherite economic policies upon both individuals and the social fabric. The 1980s and 1990s saw concerted efforts to remove all forms of liberal dissent and leftist aspiration from the map (often literally) but, as Terry Eagleton has argued recently with particular reference to Marxism, it is only because of the relevance of such dissent and aspiration to the contemporary period that both have been pushed to the periphery of mainstream political and cultural debate.[13] Without real economic and political power, however, the left is obliged to 'work through' its insistence on the economic alongside an emphasis on the importance of cultural activity as a redoubt for resistance and dissent. For instance, it is easy to conceive how Reaganism and Thatcherism may have influenced the social novel, but less easy to imagine how this influence could ever work in the opposite direction. Yet the phenomena of Reaganism and Thatcherism are a part of culture, and it is culture that has shaped – and is still shaping – our perception of the Reagan-Thatcher years. It has been argued that 'texts or cultural objects are [...] dynamic agents engaged in mutually constitutive relations with the societies in which they are situated'.[14] This allows for the possibility of contention and resistance, even if the latter is held ultimately to be subservient to the dominant structures of power in

any society, so that 'power produces resistance not only as its legitimation, as the basis for an extension of control, but as its defining difference, the other which endows it with meaning, visibility, effectivity'.[15] Alan Sinfield has presented a slightly but significantly different perspective, pointing out that, in order to exercise power, dominant groups are obliged to name the things they dominate, thereby giving those things a life and an agency that are effectively fuelled by the power of suppression.[16] Cultural artifacts are capable of revealing 'faultlines': those ideological lacunae that mark historical forces at work, simultaneously enforcing and resisting relationships of social and economic power. It is while working in these lacunae that the contemporary social novel is most effective, drawing its strength not from outright defiance or adherence to a definite social or political programme, but – paradoxically – from its own ambivalence and need for assimilation and reconciliation.

In keeping with its image as the decade of style and presentation over content, the Reagan-Thatcher period is indeed 'packaged' beautifully. Few decades coincide so neatly in chronological terms with the events with which they are closely associated and, in terms of the historical relationship between Britain and the United States of America, fewer still can be said to have dovetailed so appropriately. Margaret Thatcher was elected Prime Minister just before the beginning of the decade in May 1979, while Ronald Reagan was elected shortly afterwards, in November 1980. Reagan left office just before the close of the decade, in January 1989, whilst Thatcher was deposed several months later, in December 1990. For a suitable fanfare, the Soviet bloc and South African apartheid collapsed at roughly the same time, leaving Reagan and Thatcher, whatever the true extent of their influence over either event, looking resplendent in the reflected glory of the seemingly omnipotent global free market. Chapter 1 of this book is an assessment of the origins, definitions, features and fate of both Reaganism and Thatcherism that will provide the social and political context for the novelists whose work is discussed in subsequent chapters. Both Reagan and Thatcher are, of course, associated with economic liberalism and with social conservatism, but it is necessary to stress that neither Reaganism nor Thatcherism is *quite* the same thing as monetarism or neoconservatism. More bewilderingly, although Thatcher had her gender and uncompromising manner to set her apart from her predecessors, Reagan had little to distinguish him from dozens of other late-middle-aged, white male presidents with winning smiles and a firm belief in the free market and the pursuit of

American interests. Yet the terms 'Reaganism' and 'Reaganomics' were nonetheless coined, perhaps as no more than indicators of over a decade of continuous Republican government in which policies remained consistent and identifiable – at least by comparison with the politics of compromise and consensus that had marked previous administrations. Despite being vague and often contradictory, then, Thatcherism and Reaganism have persisted as widely used terms precisely because they *include* the qualifications and contradictions that prevent them from being associated too readily with any single political or economic phenomenon. They are rather catch-all signifiers of a set of precepts that, whatever the truth of the matter, seemed to indicate a break with what had gone before in their willingness to favour conflict and assertion over consensus and compromise. They also denote a legacy that, while it may not have destroyed consensus utterly for later decades, has moved the grounds of that consensus considerably towards the right and has therefore reduced the possibilities open for leftist political and cultural participation in the foreseeable future.

Chapter 1 will also note the way in which a number of writers and commentators have drawn correspondences between the 1980s and the 1960s that suggest an uneasy relationship between the political reversals suffered by the left during those two decades, and the role played by the countercultural left in effecting such reversals. This leads to an overview of the way in which writers and critics have addressed what has been described as the 'ideological ambivalence of the postmodern',[17] acknowledging on the one hand that the climate of postmodernity offers the political left a site (or sites) of potential resistance to the dominant orders, while on the other arguing that postmodernity, by negating all claims to depth or finality, is vulnerable to appropriation by those orders, and to the accusation that it leads only to an *impasse* of political fragmentation and quietism.

Chapter 2 will examine works by four white male British novelists, all of whom, in seeking to represent what they see as the impact of Thatcherism upon contemporary British society, invoke themes of complicity, guilt and political defeat. The first of these is Iain Banks, whose novels *Complicity* (1993) and *Dead Air* (2002) are treated as twin works that examine the conflict in the mind of the white male left-liberal between the need for violent revolution or pragmatic compromise as the most suitable response to the triumph of the New Right. This debate is revisited in Jonathan Coe's *What a Carve-Up!* (1994), which suggests that British reserve, with its distaste for extremes, is inextricably linked to its own 'other' by a covert

fascination with the extremes of gothic horror and transgressive sexuality that is both distanced and neutralized by elements such as camp and slapstick humour that function as cultural safety valves. The implication in these novels is that British popular and literary culture, by consistently suppressing, parodying and distancing itself from extremes, has refused a negotiation of those extremes in political and cultural life, and has thus allowed the right to 'carve up' the spoils of a neglected collectivist potential.

Despite undertaking a more experimental and poetic approach to the representation of Thatcher's Britain, many of the concerns addressed by Iain Sinclair's *Downriver* (1991) are strikingly similar to those of the other novelists featured in this chapter in that Sinclair's cast of bohemians and would-be revolutionaries are either marginalized by, or else become complicit with, the values that they profess to oppose. The notion of resistance is thrown back into the cultural realm to the extent that *Downriver*'s interrogation of its own modes of representation has a significant effect on both the form and the content of the novel itself.

The last of the four writers is Martin Amis, who has been chosen for two main reasons. The first of these is his association (through his father, Kingsley) with the generation of 'Angry Young Men' whose intention it was to break with what was seen as the stagnant cultural life in Britain just after World War Two. The individualistic, assertive and belligerent attitude of the 'Angries' was antecedent to the libertarian and iconoclastic 'permissiveness' of the 1960s counterculture and the rise of the New Left, and it is possible to read the three novels discussed here – *Money*, *London Fields* (1989), and *The Information* (1995) – as an interrogation of the ways in which the individualistic-libertarian legacy of the generation of Kingsley Amis, as well as its successors in the 1960s, has manifested itself in a later economic and political context. Secondly, Amis has been selected because of mixed nationality and (more arguably) mixed class origins (he was educated at private schools on both sides of the Atlantic, but his father had a working-class background). The simultaneous confirmation and subversion of class and national stereotypes that are a feature of his novels make Amis a suitable choice for an examination of the ways in which, during the 1980s and 1990s, British institutions and traditions were often perceived to be the victims of a malevolent form of 'Americanization'. Similarly, Amis's work indicates the way in which the British novel of the 1980s, in trying to escape its reputation for restrained good taste and parochialism, was in many ways repeating

the attempt of his father's generation to break with a similar tradition.

The transatlantic identity of Martin Amis provides the link to the following chapter, in which the themes of left-liberal guilt and impotence are discussed within the context of the contemporary American social novel. It will begin by discussing contrasting attitudes towards social class and political consciousness on opposite sides of the Atlantic, and will look at two novels by Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (1984) and *Mao II* (1992), in order to illustrate the ways in which white male left-liberal novelists in the United States feel at once helpless in the face of implacable political and cultural opposition to their own sympathies, yet guilty and complicit with a system in which they prosper – materially, at least. A reading of Jonathan Franzen's novel *The Corrections* (2001) will reinforce this theme and bring to light the recurrent subject in many contemporary American novels of inter-generational tension. In *The Corrections*, this takes the form of self-blame, as the younger offspring of the Lambert family contemplate the notion that material and libidinal gain has contributed to the loss of potency and satisfaction in other social and political domains.

It becomes apparent in this chapter that perceptions of the 1960s represent an important touchstone for many white male left-liberal novelists in their interrogation of Reagan's America. Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland* (1990) explicitly contrasts the two decades, suggesting that the principal reasons for the final collapse of the 1960s counterculture in the Reagan years lay within the nature of the counterculture itself. Two other novels mentioned in this chapter that share a very distinctive 1980s setting – Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987) and Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* – also make fleeting but significant references to the 1960s which imply that it was the self-indulgence of an earlier white male cohort who, in the name of personal freedom, paved the way for the 'greed is good' philosophy of the young male protagonists of both novels. Along with Ellis's first novel, *Less Than Zero* (1985), these novels are employed to illustrate the way in which immersion within the consumer-driven lifestyle of Reaganite America is deemed not to bring the satisfaction promised by its apologists, but instead a deterioration of self that leads to acts and visions of horror and despair. James Annesley has labelled such novels 'blank fictions' because of their lack of any detectable political or ethical grounding, but it is proposed that this lack is made so dramatically and exaggeratedly apparent that there can be inferred from these writings a submerged need (albeit unfulfilled) for some such grounding as an alternative to a