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The concept of “the Establishment”  
and the transformation of political argument in Britain since 1945

I

It is well known that the term “the Establishment”, in something like the sense in which it is still used in political and colloquial speech, was coined by the journalist Henry Fairlie in September 1955, in an article discussing the unmasking of the British spies Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean.<sup>1</sup> It is almost equally well known—and Fairlie later pointed out—that this attribution is mistaken.<sup>2</sup> Fairlie himself had used the term repeatedly before his oft-cited article, and the historian A.J.P. Taylor had also already done so in 1953 in a sense broadly cognate with Radical polemic against “the classes” and “the THING”, William Cobbett’s term for the fiscal-military apparatus constructed during the Napoleonic Wars.<sup>3</sup> Even then it was by no means a neologism: the biographer Hesketh Pearson and the journalist Malcolm Muggeridge had each independently used the term in 1936, and in 1928 the *New Statesman* referred to a group of writers including Kipling, Shaw and Wells as “Bishops [...] of the literary Establishment”, a transitional sense of

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Fairlie, “Political Commentary”, *Spectator* 23 September 1955, 380.

<sup>2</sup> Idem, “Evolution of a Term”, *New Yorker* 19 October 1968, 184-7.

<sup>3</sup> A.J.P. Taylor, “Books in General”, *New Statesman* 29 August 1953, 236.

the term in which a dependence upon its traditional ecclesiastical usage was still evident.<sup>4</sup> These earlier usages also appear as modulations of the sense in which John Stuart Mill, for example, had spoken of “establishments no longer considered sacred because they are establishments” due to the “assault on ancient institutions” inspired by Bentham; and of an older way of referring to Estates, or to quasi-permanent institutions of the state, that is familiar from Edmund Burke’s defence of “establishments” against the French Revolution, which included not only the Church but also “an established monarchy, an established aristocracy, and an established democracy.”<sup>5</sup>

If the concept was not entirely new in September 1955, however, the fact that it seemed so at that time is of considerable historical interest. “The Establishment” is now such a familiar part of everyday speech that its historical specificity—the fact that it fell into common use at a particular time and place, in which its novelty was widely remarked upon—is easily overlooked. This tendency has been compounded by its assimilation to the vocabulary of history and the social sciences, which was already underway in E.P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) and continued in sociological studies of elites in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>6</sup> Partly as a

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<sup>4</sup> Hesketh Pearson, *Labby: The Life of Henry Labouchere* (London, 1936), 259-60; Malcolm Muggeridge, “Men and Books”, *Time and Tide* 9 May 1936, 670-1, at 671; “Revaluations”, *New Statesman* 12 May 1928, 162-4, quotation at 162.

<sup>5</sup> John Stuart Mill, “Bentham,” in *Essays on Ethics, Religion and Society*, ed. J.M. Robson (Toronto, 1969), 79; Edmund Burke, “Reflections on the Revolution in France,” in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke, Vol. 8: The French Revolution, 1790-1794*, ed. L.G. Mitchell & William B. Todd, (Oxford, 1989), 142.

<sup>6</sup> E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963), 43, 59, 74, 137, 350, 351, 396, 397, 402, 623, 726, 813; W.L. Guttsman, “The British political elite and the class structure” in Philip Stanworth & Anthony Giddens, eds., *Elites and Power in British Society* (Cambridge, 1974); John Scott, *The Upper Classes: Property and*

result “the Establishment” is now commonly used, by historians of modern Britain and by scholars in a wide range of sub-fields, in a de-historicised and more-or-less colloquial sense to denote various kinds of entrenched power.<sup>7</sup> Even when the concept is recognised as an artefact of mid-1950s Britain, it is easily assumed to refer to something that actually existed, or to be indicative of contemporary attitudes towards such a thing (often in the context of a somewhat indistinct “decline of deference”).<sup>8</sup> As well as adopting the philosophically questionable assumption that concepts used by historical subjects had fixed referents to which they self-evidently pointed, or with which they were somehow identical, this customary understanding of “the Establishment” drains it of the meanings with which it was invested from the mid-1950s, constraining the historian’s ability to

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*Privilege in Britain* (London, 1982), 96-110; also David Cannadine, *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy* (New Haven, 1990), xii & *passim*.

<sup>7</sup> In the former category, for example, Matt Houlbrook, *Prince of Tricksters: The Incredible True Story of Netley Lucas, Gentleman Crook* (Chicago and London, 2016), 10, 54, 104, 312, 320; Emily Robinson, *The Language of Progressive Politics in Modern Britain* (Basingstoke, 2017), 125, 258. In the latter category, Anthony Pagden, *The Enlightenment: And Why It Still Matters* (New York, 2013), 172; Mark Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933-1973* (Princeton & Oxford, 2015), 298.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Houlbrook, *Prince of Tricksters*, 67, 343; Robinson, *Language of Progressive Politics*, 13; James E. Cronin, *The Politics of State Expansion: War, State and Society in Twentieth-Century Britain* (London/ New York, 1991), 229-30; Matthew Grant, “Historians, the Penguin Specials and the ‘State of the Nation’ Literature, 1958-64”, *Contemporary British History* 17 no.3 (2003), 35-7; also the discussion of the concept in two major survey histories of post-war Britain: Kenneth O. Morgan, *The People’s Peace: British History 1945-1989* (Oxford, 1990), 143, 396; and Kevin Jefferys, *Retreat from New Jerusalem: British Politics, 1951-64* (Basingstoke, 1997), 117-22. Peter Hennessy’s *Establishment and Meritocracy* (London, 2014), notwithstanding its recognition of the term’s “slipper[iness]” (14), also assumes that it refers to something that has actually existed in shifting forms in post-war Britain.

“play the stranger” which, as has been suggested elsewhere, is crucial to the study of recent and contemporary history.<sup>9</sup>

This article provides a partial historicisation of the concept of “the Establishment” by tracing its formation and usage in British political argument. Fairlie’s supposed re-coining of the term in 1955 took place amid a vigorous contestation of political and social authority that had been underway in Britain since at least the late 1930s, when the *Daily Mirror* began to construct an opposition between “the people” and a network centring on “The Church, the West End of London and the aristocracy” in discussion of Edward VIII’s prospective marriage to Wallis Simpson; and the idea of “the Cliveden Set” was formulated to denote an aristocratic cabal that had manipulated Britain’s foreign policy towards Nazi Germany.<sup>10</sup> This contestation of authority was sustained into the following decade by influential denunciations of the “Guilty Men” supposedly responsible for the failed policy of appeasement, and by the emergence of a climate of opinion in which criticisms of “vested interests” became a common feature of political and popular speech.<sup>11</sup> It therefore formed a central part of the context within which the emergence of what came to be called a “welfare state” in Britain took place during the 1940s; and as the extent and significance of the reforms of that decade arose as a defining issue in political argument from the early 1950s,

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<sup>9</sup> Guy Ortolano, *The Two Cultures Controversy: Science, Literature and Cultural Politics in Postwar Britain* (Cambridge, 2009), 8.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Adrian Bingham, “Representing the People? The *Daily Mirror*, class and political culture in inter-war Britain”, in *Brave New World: Imperial and Democratic Nation-Building in Britain between the Wars*, ed. Laura Beers and Geraint Thomas (London, 2012), 109-28, quotation at 121. On “the Cliveden Set” see Norman Rose, *The Cliveden Set: Portrait of an Exclusive Fraternity* (London, 2000), ch.8, esp. 178-80.

<sup>11</sup> “Cato,” *Guilty Men* (London, 1940); Paul Addison, *The Road to 1945: British Politics and the Second World War* (London, 1975), 131-3.

discussion of the nature and location of political authority in Britain was conducted with renewed intensity and exercised a powerful influence upon the coherence and credibility of political argument.

These fundamental issues were formulated and discussed in a new political vocabulary of which “the Establishment” was a central component alongside other, no less familiar terms such as “the welfare state” and “affluence” – both of which are also commonly assumed to have had empirical referents, but the recovery of which as concepts is crucial to understanding British politics after 1945. The operation of this new vocabulary, and the larger transformations that it helped to effect, are obscured by the dominant tendency to treat its constituent terms not as concepts but as determinate entities: as (in the case of “the Establishment”) an actually-existing power formation, or a configuration of policies and institutions (“the welfare state”), or a socio-economic condition (“affluence”).<sup>12</sup> On the contrary, the idea that something called “the Establishment” or, for example, “the welfare state” actually existed independently of the usage of those terms is an effect of the usage of the terms themselves in political argument, which is impossible to understand historically when the effect is superimposed upon the processes that produced it. The account of political history that is offered in this essay therefore differs from existing histories of British politics during the second half of the twentieth century which have been organised around clearly-defined structural transitions such as the supposed demise of social

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<sup>12</sup> A similar point has been made about historical understandings of “decline” in Guy Ortolano, “‘Decline’ as a Weapon in Cultural Politics,” in *Penultimate Adventures with Britannia*, ed. Wm. Roger Louis (London/ New York, 2008), 201-14.

democracy and rise of neoliberalism.<sup>13</sup> It is instead suggested here that British politics after 1945 was defined by an extended dispute over the nature of the polity that had emerged from the 1940s, and over the location and constitution of power within it; and that the conceptual vocabulary within which those disputes were conducted helped to set the horizons of social-democratic and conservative politics in Britain. In particular, we shall see in what follows that from the mid-1950s the extension of the limited social democracy that had been constructed during the previous decade was promised in a language that ultimately constrained it; and that the ideals of conservative government that, in its original re-coinage, “the Establishment” had served to promote was marginalised within the Conservative Party, partly through the changing usage of that concept itself.

The approach adopted in this article is therefore congruent with recent tendencies in scholarship on modern Britain to assign greater autonomy to language in processes of political, social and economic change; and with a growing interest in the “intellectual setting” of political debate that has been produced by a convergence of the so-called “new political history” with histories of “high” politics.<sup>14</sup> This latter development has produced a more sensitive and flexible

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<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Avner Offer, “The market turn: from social democracy to market liberalism”, *Economic History Review* 70 no.4 (2017), 1051-71; Aled Davies, *The City of London and Social Democracy: The Political Economy of Finance in Britain, 1959-1979* (Oxford, 2017); Neil Rollings, “Cracks in the Post-War Keynesian Settlement? The Role of Organised Business in Britain in the Rise of Neoliberalism Before Margaret Thatcher,” *Twentieth Century British History* 24, no.4 (2013), 637-659; Ben Jackson, “The think-tank archipelago: Thatcherism and neo-liberalism,” in *Making Thatcher’s Britain*, ed. Ben Jackson and Robert Saunders (Cambridge, 2012), 43-61.

<sup>14</sup> The phrase “intellectual setting” was used in Susan Pedersen, “What is political history now?”, in *What is history now?*, ed. David Cannadine (London, 2002), 42; see also David M. Craig, “‘High Politics’ and the ‘New Political History’”, *Historical Journal* 53 no.2 (2010), 453-475.

reading of political language than that offered by much of the new political history, which frequently relied upon more conventional conceptions of representation and “reality” than its exponents claimed.<sup>15</sup> The present essay also contributes to recent work on histories of political and social concepts, in which the question of the relationship between concepts and words has assumed renewed importance from the employment of digital humanities methodologies, the efficacy of which in tracing histories of word usage is not necessarily transferable to the production of histories of concepts.<sup>16</sup> The pioneering exponent of *Begriffsgeschichte*, Reinhart Koselleck, once suggested that “A word becomes a concept if [the] context of meaning in which—and for which—the word is used, is entirely incorporated into the word itself.”<sup>17</sup> In such cases, “The concept is fixed to the word, but at the same time it is more than the word”, and it is accordingly “*always* ambiguous”.<sup>18</sup> The implication—at least for the period of modernity (*Neuzeit*) that Koselleck claimed was marked by this distinctive mode of concept-formation and contestation—might be said to be that whereas words signify syntactically, political and social concepts signify in

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<sup>15</sup> A similar point has been made in Dror Wahrman, ‘The New Political History: A Review Essay’, *Social History* 21 (1996), 343-354; and in Stuart Middleton, “‘Affluence’ and the Left in Britain, c.1958-1974”, *English Historical Review* CXXIX (2014), 107-138, at 107-10.

<sup>16</sup> For a notable example of the attendant confusion, see Peter de Bolla, *The Architecture of Concepts: The Historical Formation of Human Rights* (New York, 2013), ch.1, which claims to “insis[t] on the difference between words and concepts”, but also states that “the distinction is too porous to be of much use” (25, 32).

<sup>17</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, “Richtlinien für das Lexikon Politisch-Sozialer Begriffe der Neuzeit,” *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* XI no.1 (1967), 86, quoted in Hans Erich Bödeker, “Concept—Meaning—Discourse. Begriffsgeschichte reconsidered” (trans. Allison Brown), in *History of Concepts: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Ian Hampsher-Monk, Karin Tilmans and Frank van Vree (Amsterdam, 1998), 54.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 54 (emphasis in (Koselleck’s) original).



historical time: they assimilate and thus re-shape the entire framework of meaning that defines a particular historical situation, and it is by their doing so that they can be identified as concepts. It follows that, as several historians have pointed out, the history of a concept will not be the history merely of a single corresponding term but of an ensemble of concepts and terms, and of the larger linguistic frameworks and material circumstances within which a particular concept operates (and which it helps to shape).<sup>19</sup> In the case of “the Establishment”, the point at which the word—which, with the definite article, appears to have been available by the mid-1930s—became a concept in Koselleck’s sense arrived amid the response to Fairlie’s oft-quoted usage of September 1955, and amid the disputes over political authority and the nature and extent of recent political and social change that the concept of “the welfare state” was also used to conduct. Over the following decades “the Establishment” was indeed “*always* ambiguous” in that it had neither a fixed referent nor even a consistent, clearly-defined meaning: indeed, almost all of its usages appear as no more than *possible* usages, which did not seek to assign to it a single, determinate meaning or referent that excluded all others. It is the history of these possible usages, and of the conditions for their possibility, in political argument in Britain after 1945 that this article seeks to trace.

## II

The idea of “the Establishment” was re-coined amid an intellectual revival of conservatism in post-war Britain, the leading exponents of which included the political philosopher Michael Oakeshott

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<sup>19</sup> See, for example, the oft-quoted formulation of this point in Quentin Skinner, “The idea of a cultural lexicon,” in *Visions of Politics, Volume 1: Regarding Method* (Cambridge, 2002), 159-60; also Melvin Richter, *The History of Political and Social Concepts: A Critical Introduction* (New York & Oxford, 1995), 9.

and the journalist T.E. Utley, whose work registered the prominence of questions of power and authority in political argument during the mid-1950s.<sup>20</sup> A major forum for this intellectual culture was provided by *The Spectator*, reinvigorated under Ian Gilmour's ownership from 1954 when Henry Fairlie also began writing its "Political Commentary" column. The strongest emphases in Fairlie's writing fell upon an organic conception of society and the state, and upon what he claimed was a conventionally conservative understanding of politics as the play and resolution of contending interests and opinions.<sup>21</sup> This play of interest and opinion, he claimed in September 1953, had been restricted in modern Britain by the stability of "the political and religious Establishments" of 1688.<sup>22</sup> Fairlie went on to develop a distinctive sense of "the Establishment" to connote this constraint of politics, usually as a result of collusion between party leaderships in a manner which he may have intended to echo eighteenth-century "country" opposition to the court. At the end of 1954, anticipating the next general election, he complained that "the Butskells on both sides will be fighting a mock battle with each other", the outcome of which was unimportant because "The two parties have become equal partners in the Establishment. The evidence is there in the debates of 1954. On none of the major issues [...] did the front benches, and their faithful retainers on the benches behind them, differ."<sup>23</sup> In this formulation, "the Establishment" was a long-standing political settlement the effects of which were intensified by "Butskellism", the term

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<sup>20</sup> [T.E. Utley,] "Power", *Times Literary Supplement* 12 October 1956, 601. On the wider context see Julia Stapleton, "T.E. Utley and renewal of conservatism in post-war Britain", *Journal of Political Ideologies* 19 (2014), 207-26.

<sup>21</sup> For example (respectively), Henry Fairlie, "Old Intellectuals Never Die...", *Spectator* 3 June 1955, 709-10; idem, "Political Commentary", *Spectator* 29 July 1955, 156.

<sup>22</sup> Idem, "Dean Inge and England", *Spectator* 25 September 1953, 332-3 (quotation at 332).

<sup>23</sup> Idem, "Political Commentary", *Spectator* 31 December 1954, 818; 819.

recently popularised by *The Economist* to indicate the political constraints on economic policy that operated on government and opposition parties alike.<sup>24</sup> Fairlie developed this sense of the term in an article criticising the impotence of contemporary political journalism, which he related to the fact that “The Establishment has now extended itself far beyond Crown, Church and Parliament” and “includes—amongst other institutions—the press.”—

The press today is largely owned by people who are high-ranking members of the Establishment. Whatever the differences between individual papers, there is one resemblance between them which is far more important. They all wish to preserve the ‘moderate’ Conservatives and the ‘moderate’ Socialists. They are all cast in the ‘front-bench’ frame of mind.<sup>25</sup>

These bodies of moderate opinion, Fairlie continued, “are both primarily interested in maintaining the *status quo*, in shoring up the Establishment” – obstructing the free play of “interests and ideas” which he conceived as the proper activity of politics.<sup>26</sup> He had previously argued that such an obstruction could lead to a weakening of political order, in an article criticising what he claimed was a growing separation between British society and its “governing élite” such that the latter “have no common bond but their professional interest and are without social cohesion, without social continuity.”<sup>27</sup> In response to criticism of this earlier article, Fairlie claimed to have been

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<sup>24</sup> “Mr Butskell’s Dilemma”, *Economist* 13 February 1954, 439-41.

<sup>25</sup> Henry Fairlie, “Political Commentary”, *Spectator* 29 July 1955, 156.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>27</sup> *Idem*, “True Conservatism”, *Spectator* 22 October 1954, 485-6 (quotation at 485).

concerned specifically with the working class, which had recently gained power in Britain—in what he repeatedly called a “revolution” wrought by the Attlee governments—but which could not recognise its own leaders, who adopted “a status, a manner of living, which is not that of the working classes.”<sup>28</sup> This did, however, suggest greater cohesion among the “governing élite” than Fairlie had previously allowed, and that suggestion was developed in his analysis of the Burgess-Maclean affair the following year, in which he was (and has since been) widely believed to have coined “the Establishment.”

In September 1955 the Foreign Office confirmed that the diplomats Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean, who had disappeared in 1951, had been Soviet agents and were now living in the U.S.S.R.. Amid the ensuing opprobrium Fairlie argued that the episode, and particularly the mobilisation of elite opinion in defence of the men after their disappearance, was indicative of how power was exercised in post-war Britain. “I have several times suggested that what I call the ‘Establishment’ in this country is today more powerful than ever before”, he declared, and the Burgess-Maclean affair was a case study of its *modus operandi*:

By the ‘Establishment’ I do not mean only the centres of official power—though they are certainly part of it—but rather the whole matrix of official and social relations within which

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<sup>28</sup> Idem, “True Conservatism” (letter), *Spectator* 5 November 1954, 546. Fairlie referred to the “revolution” that he believed had taken place in 1945 in “Political Commentary”, *Spectator* 14 January 1955, 32; “Political Commentary”, *Spectator* 29 April 1955, 524-5; “Political Commentary”, *Spectator* 10 June 1955, 724-5; “Political Commentary”, *Spectator* 28 October 1955, 543-4.

power is exercised. The exercise of power in Britain (more specifically, in England) cannot be understood unless it is recognised that it is exercised socially.<sup>29</sup>

Fairlie's article prompted a spirited correspondence in *The Spectator*, much of it occupied by people he had identified as members of "the Establishment" indignantly contesting his analysis and what they took to be the implication of wrongdoing on their part. In reply, Fairlie protested that "I believe that it is desirable that something like the 'Establishment' should exist, because it prevents even worse influences from operating."<sup>30</sup> In this latest sense Fairlie appears to have meant by "the Establishment" something like "the pleasing illusions" which Burke believed harmonised the social organism with the institutions of government, in contrast with the liberal or "mechanic philosophy" of revolutionary France under which the force of law was merely coercive.<sup>31</sup> It conveyed a sense of the unification of power and authority in post-war Britain; but also of the *instability* of that union, insofar as Fairlie had previously argued that the incorporation of labour leaders into this "matrix of official and social relations" jeopardised their legitimacy in the eyes of the working class.

Fairlie's claim that "the Establishment" was "more powerful than ever before" implied that the term denoted a configuration of power relations the composition of which may have been altered by the accession to it of organised labour; but the fundamental character of which remained unchanged. The circumstances of the term's re-coinage amid the Burgess and Maclean affair evoked the accusations of ruling-class treachery that "the Cliveden Set" and "Guilty Men" had

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<sup>29</sup> Henry Fairlie, "Political Commentary" (cited above at n.1), 380.

<sup>30</sup> Idem, "Political Commentary", *Spectator* 7 October 1955, 436.

<sup>31</sup> Burke, "Reflections", 128-9.

been used to formulate during the 1930s and 1940s; and in the ensuing correspondence in *The Spectator*, “the Establishment” was retrospectively applied to the networks of political and intellectual opinion that promoted appeasement during the 1930s, and to earlier episodes in British political history.<sup>32</sup> At this point, therefore, “the Establishment” was not obviously part of a novel dispensation in political argument, but rather appears to have occupied the conceptual co-ordinates within which the legitimacy of political authority in Britain had been questioned over the previous two decades. The same was true of its usage amid the denouement of Princess Margaret’s relationship with the courtier Peter Townsend a month after Fairlie’s article on the Burgess-Maclean affair, in which the alleged involvement of the Archbishop of Canterbury in dissuading Margaret from marriage prompted calls for the dis-establishment of the Anglican Church.<sup>33</sup> In this context, criticism of the ecclesiastical Establishment was readily extended to wider criticisms of the structure and exercise of power in Britain, and to claims that they were at variance with the wishes of “the people”: a usage consistent with the class-based populism formulated by the *Daily Mirror* during the abdication crisis of 1936.<sup>34</sup> Hereafter the term appears to have been rapidly assimilated to ordinary, if not yet popular, speech, so that the *New Statesman*, for example, could refer to Harold Macmillan’s views during the 1930s as having brought upon him “the bitter hatred

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<sup>32</sup> Robert Boothby, ““The Establishment”” (letter), *Spectator* 7 October 1955, 448; Henry Fairlie, “Political Commentary: How Guilty Were The Guilty Men?”, *Spectator* 2 December 1955, 758-60; “Writer to the Establishment”, *The Economist* 3 December 1955, 838.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, “Princess Margaret”, *Sunday Times* 16 October 1955, 8; “Opinion: Double Trouble”, *Daily Express* 31 October 1955, 4; “Appeal for Church Freedom”, *The Times* 14 November 1955, 6.

<sup>34</sup> ““The Times’ and Monarchy”, *New Statesman* 29 October 1955, 528; Michael Foot, “The Royalty Racket”, *Tribune* 4 November 1955, 10; Bingham, “Representing the People?”.

of the Establishment” within the Conservative Party.<sup>35</sup> It was sufficiently recognisable for *The Spectator* to include a spoof “Establishment Game” in its Christmas 1955 issue; and in January 1956 the magazine’s columnist “Pharos” remarked, “I see that the new sense of the word ‘Establishment’ is now becoming quite respectable”, after the radical clergyman John Collins used it in St. Paul’s to denote a network of institutions from which the church ought to extract itself, in order to safeguard its integrity.<sup>36</sup>

### III

Within twelve months of Fairlie’s first re-coining of the term, therefore, “the Establishment” had acquired two different senses in his usage and another set of pejorative meanings that renewed the discursive template within which a latent antagonism between “the people” and a loosely-defined socio-political elite had been constructed since the late 1930s. From early 1956 the term also began to be assimilated to debates within the Labour Party over the course of recent political and economic change, in which widespread discussion of a global transition from capitalism to “managerialism” was joined by divergent accounts of the nature and extent of the welfare reforms of the 1940s in Britain.<sup>37</sup> Since the later 1940s it had become a commonplace to refer to those

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<sup>35</sup> “Keeper of Their Conscience”, *New Statesman* 5 November 1955, 570. See also, for example, “Writer to the Establishment”, *Economist* 3 December 1955, 838.

<sup>36</sup> “The Establishment Game: How to Get on Without Actually Doing Anything”, *Spectator* 23 December 1955, 866-7; “Pharos”, “A Spectator’s Notebook”, *Spectator* 20 January 1956, 71.

<sup>37</sup> On discussions of “managerialism”, see Stephen Brooke, “Atlantic Crossing? American Views of Capitalism and British Socialist Thought 1932-1962”, *Twentieth Century British History* 2 (1991), 115-17. Contending interpretations of managerialism formed one of the major fault-lines in the influential *New Fabian Essays* of 1952: see R.H.S.

reforms as having created a “welfare state”, a concept whose usage could imply that Labour (as the principal reforming agent) had been incorporated into the political nation, in contrast to the dominant representation of it in inter-war political culture.<sup>38</sup> After the party’s return to opposition in 1951 this supposed change in Labour’s relationship to the polity was associated with descriptions of it as an “alternative government” – a long-used phrase that acquired new meanings within and outside the party, validating calls for discipline or “responsibility” by reference to a supposedly new political dispensation.<sup>39</sup> In the extension of these discussions beyond 1955 it became increasingly common to refer to the changed position of the Labour Party within a transformed polity by describing it as part of “the Establishment.”<sup>40</sup>

However, the nature of the political dispensation that had emerged from the 1940s continued to be contested, as was the concept of “the Establishment”. In particular, among those

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Crossman, “Towards a Philosophy of Socialism” in *New Fabian Essays*, ed. Crossman (London, 1952), at 10-11; C.A.R. Crosland, “The Transition from Capitalism”, *ibid.*, 38-9; 44.

<sup>38</sup> On which see Ross McKibbin, “Class and Conventional Wisdom: The Conservative Party and the ‘Public’ in Inter-war Britain”, in McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain, 1880-1950* (Oxford, 1990); and David Jarvis, “British Conservatism and Class Politics in the 1920s”, *English Historical Review* CXI (1996), 59-84.

<sup>39</sup> Outside the party, the phrase was particularly favoured (in exhortatory mode) in *The Times*: see for example the editorials “Labour Thinking”, *The Times* 27 June 1952, 7; “Mr. Bevan’s Pronouncement”, *The Times* 16 October 1952, 7; “A Sorry Affair”, *The Times* 30 January 1953, 7; “Need for a Policy”, *The Times* 5 March 1953, 9; “Substitutes for a Policy”, *The Times* 17 June 1953, 7. Within the party, see “The Duty of an Opposition: Mr. Morrison’s Call for Party Unity”, *The Times* 27 October 1952, 2; “Labour and Conservative Attacks on Mr. Bevan”, *The Times* 7 March 1955, 6.

<sup>40</sup> For example, Tom Burns, “The Cold Class War”, *New Statesman* 7 April 1956, 330-1 (at 330); R.H.S. Crossman, “Changing the Climate of Opinion”, *New Statesman* 12 May 1956, 526-8; A.J.P. Taylor, “The Way We Live Now”, *New Statesman* 8 September 1956, 288-9.



for whom “the welfare state” denoted only a limited and incomplete set of reforms, the identification of Labour with “the Establishment” could suggest that its proper objectives had been compromised or frustrated in its encounter with traditional centres and practices of power in Britain.<sup>41</sup> This latter usage was facilitated by Robert McKenzie’s celebrated study *British Political Parties* (1955), which claimed that the distribution of power within the Conservative and Labour parties was “overwhelmingly similar” and that in both cases it effectively maintained the predominance of the leadership over the parliamentary party and wider party membership.<sup>42</sup> Thus when Aneurin Bevan, for example, gave a speech in February 1956 criticising the management of the Parliamentary Labour Party, he evoked a rich set of associations in contemporary political culture which the *New Statesman* recognised as a challenge to “the Labour Party establishment.”<sup>43</sup> Bevan himself followed the speech with an article complaining of “the blurring of the demarcation lines between the parties” and warning that “if the progressive party is to succeed it must challenge the assumptions [...] on which the existing pattern of society is based” – a statement which aligned the leaderships of the Labour and Conservative Parties in a sense consistent with Fairlie’s first re-coining of “the Establishment”, but which was based on a radically different understanding of what Bevan called “the existing pattern of society.” (As we saw, Fairlie had characterised the reforms of the 1940 as a “revolution”, but Bevan—one of their principal architects—regarded them as

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<sup>41</sup> For example in Peter Townsend, “A Society for People” in *Conviction*, ed. Norman MacKenzie (London, 1958), 108; also Dennis Potter, “Base Ingratitude?”, *New Statesman* 3 May 1958, 560-2; E.P. Thompson, ‘At the Point of Decay’, in *Out of Apathy* ed. E.P. Thompson (London, 1960), 9.

<sup>42</sup> R.T. McKenzie, *British Political Parties: The Distribution of Power Within the Conservative and Labour Parties* (London, 1955), 582, 590.

<sup>43</sup> “Mr. Bevan’s Broadside”, *New Statesman* 11 February 1956, 140.

incomplete and liable to reversal).<sup>44</sup> In another speech later in the year, Bevan could therefore counterpose “the party establishment” to the “socialism” for which Labour supposedly stood.<sup>45</sup>

This claim that a vaguely-defined “socialism” was frustrated or obstructed by the operation of power in Britain also extended to criticisms, by some Labour politicians, of what they took to be the trade union leadership’s incorporation into what Bevan had called “the existing pattern of society.” In December 1955 a major article in the *New Statesman* bemoaned “the political vacuum created by the welfare state”, in which “A handful of trade union leaders and Old Etonians settle major issues of policy behind closed doors.”<sup>46</sup> This was one element of an anti-democratic power nexus that the author called “the Hydra”, the composition of which was markedly similar to what Fairlie had recently termed “the Establishment” but which placed a stronger emphasis upon the presence, “lurking in the background”, of “those ultimate horrors, the dark Tudor figure of Lord Salisbury and the composite T.U.C. monster.”<sup>47</sup> (Fairlie himself responded to the article by identifying “the Hydra” with “the Establishment”, but denying the suggestion that it was at odds with public opinion.)<sup>48</sup> In 1956 the Labour politician and journalist Richard Crossman claimed that in post-war Britain the “State bureaucracy” and the trade unions were major components of a new managerialist economy: the unions, he claimed, “have now become established institutions, with deep roots in the existing social order, and display for this reason a quite natural reluctance to

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<sup>44</sup> For example Aneurin Bevan, “A Declaration of Class War”, *Tribune* 22 March 1957, 4 (emphasis added).

<sup>45</sup> Aneurin Bevan, “Now let’s give a Socialist lead”, *Tribune* 12 October 1956, p.5.

<sup>46</sup> Paul Johnson, “Hunting the Hydra”, *New Statesman* 31 December 1955, 874.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 874.

<sup>48</sup> Henry Fairlie, “Political Commentary”, *Spectator* 6 January 1956, 5-6.

accept any radical change which seems inimical to their own interests.”<sup>49</sup> His call for a renewed commitment to democracy in Labour politics was echoed in *Tribune*, which was routinely critical of union leaders’ accommodation with what its editor called “the British ruling class”, and proclaimed itself a champion of “militant, democratic trade unionism” centred on the shop floor.<sup>50</sup>

The identification of socialism with democracy, and the counterposition of those terms to a network of power that supposedly pursued its own interests without any democratic sanction, became a more marked feature of Labour rhetoric during the Suez affair, when Gaitskell’s opposition to the Government provided his internal critics with an opportunity to situate Labour outside the predominant structures and practices of power in Britain, and thus to stake out the ground of party unity away from revisionism. On 28 September 1956, for example, as British threats of military action intensified, Bevan declared that the incipient conflict manifested a “transition” in Britain that was accomplishing “a break with the past”, and that “The trouble with the Tories is that they refuse to admit this. In domestic as in foreign affairs they have conformed to all the assumptions, policies and conventions of the Establishment.”<sup>51</sup> Similarly, the manner in which Anthony Eden was eventually succeeded as prime minister by Harold Macmillan in January 1957—the penultimate occasion on which a British premier emerged from clandestine soundings among leading Conservative politicians—was presented as an affront to democracy in *Tribune* and

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<sup>49</sup> Richard Crossman, *Socialism and the New Despotism*, Fabian tract 298 (London, 1956), 5, 5-6, 11.

<sup>50</sup> See, for example, “John Marullus”, “Were the Webbs so wonderful?”, *Tribune* 13 April 1956, 4; “Tribune Never (Well, Hardly Ever) Forgets”, *Tribune* 28 December 1956), 6.

<sup>51</sup> Aneurin Bevan, “This minor Caesar”, *Tribune* 28 September 1956, 4. See also Kingsley Martin, “The Swing Towards Sanity”, *New Statesman* 11 August 1956, 153; “Resist Eden every inch of the way”, *Tribune* 17 August 1956, 1; “John Marullus”, “These weak and cowardly Tories should hang their heads in shame!”, *Tribune* 9 November 1956, 4; John Raymond, “The Fall of the House of Ushers”, *New Statesman* 8 December 1956, 749-50.

the *New Statesman*, with Bevan, again, taking particular exception to the covert influence supposedly exercised by the Marquess of Salisbury as a representative of “the Establishment”.<sup>52</sup> Macmillan’s accession to the Premiership was therefore used to help secure the populist usage of “the Establishment” that had emerged over 1956-7 among Labour critics of revisionism, in which it referred to an antiquated ruling class that obstructed the interests and wishes of “democracy” – which were taken to be identical with the desire of the Labour “left” to move beyond the institutions and policies denoted by “the welfare state” to a broader (but often vaguely-defined) programme of socialist reform. The argument that such a programme of reform was still necessary was seemingly validated in a speech given by Macmillan in March 1957, contrasting “the opportunity state” to the welfare state and promising to free the economy from the constraints of nationalisation.<sup>53</sup> Although the pattern of Conservative welfare policy over the following seven years generally involved what Rodney Lowe characterises as “initial [...] hostile scrutiny” followed by effective extension of provision in many areas, Macmillan’s counterposition of “the opportunity state” to the “welfare state” was seized upon by Bevan and others in the party, as an indication that even the limited reforms denoted by the latter term were under threat.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Aneurin Bevan, “Save Democracy – Have a General Election Now”, *Tribune* 18 January 1957, 5. See also Michael Foot, “Get Out Now—Face the Country!” *Tribune* 11 January 1957, 1; idem, “the Awful Choice for the Queen”, *Tribune* 18 January 1957, 1-2; “Familiar Faces and Old Problems”, *New Statesman* 19 January 1957, 57; J.P.W. Mallalieu, “Westminster: The Kissing Ring”, *ibid.*, 60-1.

<sup>53</sup> “Government Determination to Achieve Opportunity State”, *The Times* 19 March 1957, 4.

<sup>54</sup> Rodney Lowe, “The Replanning of the Welfare State”, in *The Conservatives in Modern British Society, 1880-1990*, ed. Martin Francis and Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska (Cardiff, 1996), 255-73, quotation at 261; Bevan, “A Declaration of Class War”.

This new usage of “the Establishment” to denote a network of power centring on the Conservative Party that had successfully constrained or frustrated the Attlee governments, and to signify the Labour leadership’s complicity in a cross-party formation of opinion that obstructed “socialist” reform, became particularly distinctive among the grouping that Ben Pimlott identified as the Labour “Centre Left”, critical of Gaitskell’s leadership but distant from Bevan, whose leading figures were Harold Wilson and Richard Crossman and whose positions broadly aligned with the editorial tendency of the *New Statesman*.<sup>55</sup> “The Establishment” featured prominently in Wilson’s critiques of British economic performance, as a pattern of conventional economic opinion to which the Government was supposedly in thrall; and the economist Thomas Balogh adopted the term to link Britain’s post-war economic performance with what he claimed was a gentlemanly amateurism in the ethos and personnel of the British state.<sup>56</sup> (Wilson and Balogh’s criticisms of economic performance were also facilitated by the availability of new methods of economic measurement that helped to construct narratives of “decline” from the late 1950s.)<sup>57</sup> A similar argument was also advanced by J.B. Priestley under the rubric of “Topside”, his near-synonym for “the Establishment” which he defined as “*the reaction against a revolution that never*

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<sup>55</sup> Ben Pimlott, *Harold Wilson* (London, 1992), 186, 189-90. For a particularly notable example of the *New Statesman*’s employment of the term, see “Lords, Ladies and Reactionaries”, *New Statesman* 16 November 1957, 637.

<sup>56</sup> Harold Wilson, “Remedies for Inflation II—The Unemployment School”, *Manchester Guardian* 24 October 1957, 8; idem, *Post-war Economic Policies in Britain*, Fabian tract 309 (London, 1957), 14; idem, Speech to the House of Commons, 26 November 1959, Parliamentary Debates, 5<sup>th</sup> series, vol. 614 (1959-60), col. 601; Thomas Balogh, “A New Orthodoxy?”, *New Statesman* 12 April 1958, 482; idem, “The Apotheosis of the Dilettante” in *The Establishment*, ed. Hugh Thomas (London, 1959), 83-126.

<sup>57</sup> Jim Tomlinson, “Inventing ‘Decline’: The Falling Behind of the British Economy in the Postwar Years”, *Economic History Review* n.s. 49 (1996), 731-757.

*happened*” – that is, the successful resistance of traditional centres of power to the incomplete reforms of the Attlee governments.<sup>58</sup> The implication of the Labour leadership in these critical usages of “the Establishment” was facilitated by the launch of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in 1958, which was customarily presented as an anti-“Establishment” movement, and by Gaitskell’s resistance to its demand for unilateral disarmament.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, Bevan himself could be brought within this sense of “the Establishment” after he affirmed his support for British nuclear weapons at the Labour Party conference in 1957, although he continued to use it as a term of abuse.<sup>60</sup>

#### IV

These usages of “the Establishment”, particularly in Wilson and Balogh’s criticisms of Britain’s post-war economic performance, prefigured the pattern of argument in which outmoded cultural values and assumptions were held to be constraining Britain’s political and economic institutions, which became a prominent feature of public discourse during the early 1960s.<sup>61</sup> This did not,

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<sup>58</sup> J.B. Priestley, *Topside, or the Future of England* (London, 1958), 14 (emphasis in original).

<sup>59</sup> See, for example, “Comments on the Week’s News”, *New Statesman* 1 March 1958, 254; J.B. Priestley, “Campaign Report”, *New Statesman* 29 March 1958, 402-3; J.P.W. Mallalieu, “Aldermaston: Against the Establishment”, *New Statesman* 12 April 1958, 455-6.

<sup>60</sup> See, for example, Peter Sedgwick, “NATO, the Bomb and Socialism”, *Universities and Left Review* 7 (1959), p.10; “Critic”, “London Diary”, *New Statesman* 19 April 1958, 495-6 (although not using the word itself); and for Bevan’s usage, “May Be Labour’s Last Chance”, *Manchester Guardian* 2 October 1958, 2: “I am fundamentally against the Establishment. I do not like it. It is squalid, it is ugly, it is mean, it is disillusioning and altogether unpleasant.”

<sup>61</sup> Grant, “Historians, the Penguin Specials”.

however, originate as a response to the actual emergence or renewed predominance of any identifiable group, or set of beliefs and practices, to which “the Establishment” self-evidently referred. Attempts by, for example, the incipient “New Left” to assemble empirical evidence that the power of business, political and social elites had become more integrated and extensive after the war was met by empirical evidence, assembled by the Labour revisionist Anthony Crosland, that it had not.<sup>62</sup> Nor were they demonstrably indicative of shifts in wider political or cultural opinion, or in public opinion at large. For example, public discussion of the “angry young man” supposedly portrayed in John Osborne’s play *Look Back in Anger*, which premiered in May 1956, has been presented as emerging from “a wave of anti-establishment writing” during the mid- and late 1950s.<sup>63</sup> Yet the emergence of the “angry young man” as a subject of wide public discussion did not straightforwardly reinforce the pejorative usages of “the Establishment” that some in the Labour Party were developing during the mid- and late 1950s. Blake Morrison has observed of the “Movement” writers, several of whom (including Kingsley Amis and John Wain) were also commonly identified among the “angry young men”, that they occupied “an ambivalent position” towards structural inequality and the institutions of traditional authority in post-war Britain: “on

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<sup>62</sup> “The Insiders” *Universities and Left Review* 3 (1958), 26-64; Michael Barratt-Brown, “The Controllers”, *Universities and Left Review* 5 (1958), 53-61; C.A.R. Crosland, “Insiders and Controllers” in Crosland, *The Conservative Enemy: A Programme of Radical Reform for the 1960s* (London, 1962), 68-96.

<sup>63</sup> Nicola Wilson, “Working-Class Fictions”, in Peter Boxall and Bryan Cheyette, eds., *The Oxford History of the Novel in English, Volume 7: British and Irish Fiction since 1940* (Oxford, 2016), 64-79, quotation at 64. For contemporary constructions of the “Angry Young Man/ Men” as hostile to “the Establishment”, see Doris Lessing, “The Small Personal Voice” in *Declaration*, ed. Tom Maschler (London, 1957), 13-27; John Osborne, “They Call it Cricket” *ibid.*, 67; Kenneth Tynan, “Theatre and Living”, *ibid.*, 124; Kenneth Allsop, *The Angry Decade: A Survey of the Cultural Revolt of the Nineteen-Fifties* (Wendover, 1958; repr. 1985), 31.

the one hand opposed to the ‘old order’; on the other hand, indebted to, and respectful towards, its institutions”, to the “values” of which they continued to subscribe.<sup>64</sup> This ambivalence was exemplified by John Wain, who wrote in March 1957 (in an article disclaiming his identity as an “angry young man”) that, amid the cultural disinheritance visited upon the working class by industrialism and mass culture, “the Establishment” (which he defined as “a network of men from the right schools and colleges, belonging to the right clubs and married to the right sort of wives [...] within which all effective decisions are made”) represented a locus of continuity in national culture, which should be maintained and reformed only “slowly and cautiously.”<sup>65</sup>

This use of “the Establishment” with a positive evaluative force was not unusual in the late 1950s. Indeed A.J.P. Taylor, who had used “the Establishment” in a pejorative sense shortly before Fairlie was believed to have re-coined the term, actually argued in October 1957 that it should be abandoned in favour of Cobbett’s “THE THING”, because “The very word [...] tempts us to acknowledge the moral superiority of ‘the Establishment’”.<sup>66</sup> That pejorative senses of the term were not its only, nor even perhaps its predominant, usages is confirmed by its employment in conservative commentary. Fairlie, for example, claimed in a review of C. Wright Mills’s much-discussed book *The Power Elite* in 1956 that “The Establishment” was a desirable ethical safeguard against the commercial “power elite” and public opinion.<sup>67</sup> In the first issue of *Crossbow*,

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<sup>64</sup> Blake Morrison, *The Movement: British Poetry and Fiction of the 1950s* (Oxford, 1980), 75.

<sup>65</sup> John Wain, “How it Strikes a Contemporary”, *The Twentieth Century* 161 (1957), 229; 229-30. Wain’s article was sur-titled: “A Young Man who is Not Angry” (227).

<sup>66</sup> A.J.P. Taylor, “Is There a Power Elite? (I) The Thing”, *The Twentieth Century* 162 (1957), 293-7 (quotation at 295).

<sup>67</sup> Henry Fairlie, “Political Commentary”, *Spectator* 25 May 1956, 709-11. See also the contrast between “the Establishment” and “Utopia” in Christopher Johnson, “Piecemeal Philosophy”, *Crossbow* Autumn 1958, 16-20, at 18.



the journal of the Conservative Party's newly-formed Bow Group, T.E. Utley presented an account of post-war political history almost directly opposed to that which we have seen was propounded by the Labour "centre-left" in which (like Fairlie) he claimed that the Attlee governments *had* produced a radically altered political dispensation comprising full employment and universal social services, which required a kind of stabilisation through which they would become "established institutions."<sup>68</sup> That stabilisation Utley conceived as the proper task of conservative government: the previous year he had published a vindication of Anthony Eden in terms of "what is roughly called Burkian [*sic*] Conservatism", crediting him with moderating the reforms of the Attlee governments whilst avoiding the opposite extreme of *laissez-faire* economics.<sup>69</sup> Utley's call for the creation of "established institutions" was particularly directed at "the trade union movement", which he suggested had been pursuing the interests of its members and not those of the "nation" as a whole.<sup>70</sup> Elsewhere at this time Utley also claimed that the unions *were* now part of what he called "an establishment", but that this larger formation was faced with the urgent task of conciliating middle-class workers "whose interests have been disproportionately sacrificed as the price of a compromise with organized labour": in other words, the unions were part of an "Establishment" which they were preventing from acting as Utley believed establishments properly should.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> T.E. Utley, "The Great Soft Centre", *Crossbow* Autumn 1957, 15-18, quotation at 18.

<sup>69</sup> *Idem*, *Not Guilty (The Conservative Reply)* (London, 1957), v.

<sup>70</sup> Utley, "Great Soft Centre", 18.

<sup>71</sup> T.E. Utley, "England Today: II. Reaction", *The Twentieth Century* 161 (Jan. 1957), 23-9, quotations at 29.

Utley's claim that the unions had yet to become proper "establishments" in this sense was widely echoed among conservative commentators in the late 1950s.<sup>72</sup> ("[W]hat we have to do", one Bow Group member mused in 1960, "is to make them even more a part of the establishment than they are already.")<sup>73</sup> This may have registered a tension, to which Robert Taylor has called attention, within the unions themselves between leaderships' belief that they had assumed a permanent role in national economic management, and the attitudes of local officials such as the one who told the sociologist Ferdynand Zweig in 1952: "Our movement is basically a sectionalist movement for the benefit of small sectionalist interests [...] It is all right having the national interest in mind but we are not the right people to have it."<sup>74</sup> Nonetheless, collaboration between government and the unions was maintained during the early 1950s, primarily through close personal contacts between union leaders and the Minister of Labour, Sir Walter Monckton – which, as we have seen, alarmed some Labour figures who viewed the unions as part of a politically-constraining post-war "Establishment."<sup>75</sup> The election of Frank Cousins as general secretary of the Transport and General Workers' Union in 1956 made it more difficult for the unions to be identified *en bloc* with the "Establishment" in this sense, as he challenged not only the mutual restraint of government-union relations but also the Labour leadership in a series of confrontations over party democracy.<sup>76</sup> However, this alteration in the temper of T.U.C. politics also tended to

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<sup>72</sup> See for example David Ovens, "An Expanding Society—I. Look to the Future", *Crossbow* New Year 1958, 13-14; John Ward, "An Expanding Society—III. The unions have a part", *ibid.*, 17-18; "Democracy and the Unions", *Crossbow* Summer 1958, 5; Patrick Medd, "Menace to Individual Liberty", *ibid.*, 10-11.

<sup>73</sup> W.F. Frank, "New Laws for New Unionism", *Crossbow* Spring 1960, 47.

<sup>74</sup> Taylor, *Trade Union Question*, ch.2 (quotation at 46).

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 81-90.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 101-2.

vindicate criticisms of the inherently sectional activities of the unions, which in conservative usage remained un- or incompletely “established”, exacerbating Labour’s difficulties in demonstrating its capacity to reconcile national and sectional interests.

Those difficulties may partly explain why a call by the *New Statesman* for Labour to present itself as “the party of outrage and challenge and change” in the 1959 election went unheeded.<sup>77</sup> Despite the rhetoric of Wilson, Balogh, and other members of the Labour “centre-left”, the party also remained deeply implicated in usages of “the Establishment” that referred to the polity and political economy established during the 1940s, and it was therefore not the only plausible exponent of “radical” politics.<sup>78</sup> In other words, at this stage the term could signify the entrenchment of social-democratic policies and institutions in Britain as much as it supported demands for their extension. Furthermore the critical force of the term beyond the somewhat rarefied sphere of national political commentary remained highly questionable. “Do you assume that young people dislike the Establishment?”, the journalist Norman MacKenzie inquired in the light of a Gallup poll in June 1959: “Then consider how many have a ‘good’ or ‘fairly good’ opinion of such of its branches as the royal family, the Church of England, the armed forces and the big corporations: all score well over 50 per cent.”<sup>79</sup> Recent re-examination of sociological surveys from the early 1960s has indicated a perception among working-class respondents of a natural distinction between a majority of “ordinary” individuals and a distant elite whose position was thus likewise naturalised, and which could therefore appear as a legitimate object of

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<sup>77</sup> “Putting on the Best Face”, *New Statesman* 8 August 1959, 149.

<sup>78</sup> See, for example, Henry Fairlie, “The British Radical in 1959: Romantic Imperialist”, *Spectator* 19 June 1959, 876-7; Altrincham, “The British Radical in 1959: Untapped Resources”, *Spectator* 17 July 1959, 60.

<sup>79</sup> Norman MacKenzie, “The Up and Comers”, *New Statesman* 13 June 1959, 819.

deference.<sup>80</sup> Similar attitudes were found in a study of working-class Conservative voters in Stevenage published in *New Left Review* immediately after the 1959 election, which identified a pattern of “deference” to traditional and business elites associated with the Conservative Party.<sup>81</sup>

“The Establishment” had therefore acquired no single, clearly-defined usage at the time of the 1959 general election. In August that year the *Spectator* issued its own critique of “the Establishment”, in the sense of what it called “an oligarchy of opinion, both pervasive and influential” which supposedly produced a stifling conformism in political culture.<sup>82</sup> The term’s fluidity was also evident in Hugh Thomas’s symposium *The Establishment* (1959), which is often cited as though it was straightforwardly critical of something to which the concept of “the Establishment” referred.<sup>83</sup> Yet alongside essays by Balogh, Fairlie and the *Spectator*’s literary critic Simon Raven each elaborating *different* pejorative definitions of the term (in Fairlie’s case, *contra* his previous insistence that it held no such force), the book included another by the former Conservative MP Christopher Hollis, who regretted that “the Establishment” in the sense of “some mysterious, social influence [...] which really controls our destinies” did not have a more palpable existence.<sup>84</sup> The relative novelty, and instability, of the term was also apparent in its outright

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<sup>80</sup> Mike Savage, “Working-Class Identities in the 1960s: Revisiting the Affluent Worker Study”, *Sociology* 39 (2005), 939-40.

<sup>81</sup> Ralph Samuel, “The Deference Voter”, *New Left Review* I/1 (1960), 9-13. A broadly similar “desire to defer to the old elite” was ascribed to parts of the new or “mobile middle class” in Richard Rose, “Going up and in between”, *Crossbow* October-December 1962, 36 – although by this time Rose believed it was alloyed by more critical attitudes.

<sup>82</sup> “The Establishment Game”, *Spectator* 14 August 1959, 179-80.

<sup>83</sup> For example in Cronin, *Politics of State Expansion*, 229; Grant, “Historians, the Penguin Specials”, 30, 35-6.

<sup>84</sup> Henry Fairlie, “The B.B.C.” in Thomas, ed., *The Establishment*, 191-208; Simon Raven, “Perish by the Sword”, *ibid.*, 49-79; Christopher Hollis, “Parliament and the Establishment”, *ibid.*, 187.

rejection by some commentators.<sup>85</sup> In the 1959 election it was the Liberal Party, rejuvenated since 1956 under Jo Grimond's leadership, that came closest to articulating an anti-"Establishment" appeal: its manifesto derided "Tory bigwigs" and "Labour bosses" in the same register, and claimed that Labour's financing by "the vested interests of the Trade Union establishment" precluded it from becoming a properly "progressive party."<sup>86</sup> After the poll, in which the Conservative majority was increased to 100, the *New Statesman* acknowledged that it had been criticism of the apparatus and institutions of the state created by Labour that had been most telling in the campaign.<sup>87</sup>

## V

The ambiguity of the concept of "the Establishment" was initially maintained in the debates that followed the election, which extended those of the previous decade over Labour's relation to the post-war polity. However, over the course of those debates "the Establishment" was situated more firmly within a distinctively contemporary conceptual vocabulary, in which it acquired the meanings that enabled it to be deployed in the political appeal that Harold Wilson articulated before the 1964 election amid wider discursive constructions of a crisis of traditional authority in Britain. Firstly, the post-1959 debates received a new emphasis from the adoption of the concept of "affluence" from J.K. Galbraith's *The Affluent Society* (1958), which Richard Crossman used

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<sup>85</sup> Alasdair Macintyre, "The Straw Man of the Age", *New Statesman* 3 October 1959, 434; T.R. Fyvel, "The B.B.C. Image", *Encounter* December 1959, 56.

<sup>86</sup> F.W.S. Craig, *British General Election Manifestos 1918-1966* (Chichester, 1970), 207.

<sup>87</sup> "The Labour Inquest", *New Statesman* 17 October 1959, 493.

to suggest that post-war capitalism, and thus the requirement for Labour to present itself as an “anti-Establishment party” rather than “a staid Alternative Government”, remained unchanged.<sup>88</sup> Gaitskell’s critics accordingly continued to use “the Establishment” to characterise his leadership as oligarchic and anti-democratic, and to indicate his failure to articulate a distinctive, radical policy (the precise content of which was, as before, often somewhat vague).<sup>89</sup> Meanwhile Anthony Crosland, the leading theorist of Labour “revisionism”, strenuously rebutted New Left analyses of power in post-war Britain and used “affluence” to denote a transformation of capitalism that necessitated a fundamental revision of Labour’s priorities – in particular, a reduction of its emphasis on public ownership and of its identification with the working class, to enable it to win support among a technical and managerial “salarariat” whose electoral influence was widely discussed after 1959.<sup>90</sup>

From 1959 “affluence” was also adopted in conservative commentary to denote Britain’s transition to an era of high mass consumption, a stage of capitalist development that was identified with economic modernity in the analyses of Galbraith and other American writers.<sup>91</sup> This also supported the turn away from universal state welfare that Macmillan’s vague concept of “the

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<sup>88</sup> R.H.S. Crossman, *Labour in the Affluent Society*, Fabian tract 325 (London, 1960), 3.

<sup>89</sup> See, for example, Ralph Miliband, “The Sickness of Labourism”, *New Left Review* I/1 (1960), 9; “Silencing the Watchdogs”, *New Statesman* 26 March 1960, 438; “The Meaning of Aldermaston”, *New Statesman* 31 March 1961, 500-1; R.H.S. Crossman, “The Labour Left”, *New Statesman* 20 October 1961, 564-6; J.B. Priestley, “Ambience or Agenda?”, *New Statesman* 2 February 1962, 156-8.

<sup>90</sup> Crosland, *Conservative Enemy*, ch.5; idem, *Can Labour Win?*, Fabian tract 324 (London, 1960), 10-11. For discussion of the “new” middle class, see also “Growing Electoral Importance of Black Coated Workers”, *The Times* 28 September 1959, 7; D.E. Butler & Richard Rose, *The British General Election of 1959* (London, 1960), 14.

<sup>91</sup> Notably Walt Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge, 1960).

opportunity state” had seemingly heralded. After the 1959 election the Bow Group began to advance the idea of “the post-Welfare State”, and in 1961 R.A. Butler publicly advocated “welfare through growth”, holding out the prospect that state welfare provision would be supplanted by expanding personal prosperity.<sup>92</sup> The sense of widening disagreement over welfare policy was reinforced by Enoch Powell’s appointment as Minister of Health – which was actually welcomed in the *New Statesman*, on the grounds that it might dispel the myth of the two parties’ convergence under the sign of “the Establishment”.<sup>93</sup> Before long Labour could also point to empirical evidence countering the idea of “the welfare state” as a transformative political and social settlement: the social worker Audrey Harvey’s study of poverty for the Fabian Society in 1960 culminated with the observation that “We have been deluded into thinking [...] that we have already achieved a Welfare State”, a formulation in which “Welfare State” signified a degree or standard of provision of which contemporary Britain fell short.<sup>94</sup> Harvey’s study was reinforced by the “rediscovery of poverty” promoted by the sociologists Peter Townsend and Brian Abel-Smith, and at the end of 1962 by the social scientist Richard Titmuss’s study of inequality in Britain, which concluded that “the present generation has been mesmerized by the language of ‘the Welfare State’”, and that the popular assumption that “after 1948 [...] all the answers had been found to the problems of health, education, social welfare and housing” was erroneous.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Beau Giles, “Bow Notebook”, *Crossbow* New Year, 1961, 53, and *Principles in Practice: A Series of Bow Group Essays for the 1960s* (London, 1961); Beau Giles, “Bow Notebook”, *Crossbow* Spring, 1961, 49.

<sup>93</sup> J.P.W. Mallalieu, “Apostle of Conflict”, *New Statesman* 17 September 1960, 366-7.

<sup>94</sup> Audrey Harvey, *Casualties of the Welfare State*, Fabian tract 321 (London, 1960), 31.

<sup>95</sup> R.M. Titmuss, *Income Distribution and Social Change: A Study in Criticism* (London, 1962), 188. On the “rediscovery of poverty” see Middleton, ““Affluence””, 121-2 and 126-7.

Shortly after the 1959 election Titmuss had also developed a new analysis of power in Britain which distinguished between the “responsible”, or democratically-accountable, power of the nationalized industries and trade unions, and the “irresponsible” power of private business interests.<sup>96</sup> This was partly a riposte to the idea of “the responsible society” which the Conservative “One Nation” group had promoted before the election, ostensibly as a *via media* between the “extremes” of laissez-faire and socialism that would foster voluntaristic social action in civil society.<sup>97</sup> More importantly, however, Titmuss’s widely-adopted dichotomy tacitly defended the institutions of state created by Labour, and the unions, from the criticisms to which they had been subjected in 1959; while grounding the critical usages of “affluence” that were proliferating within the Labour Party upon a new analysis of economic power.<sup>98</sup> The consumerist prosperity that Macmillan’s governments had appeared to celebrate in the 1959 election was already causing disquiet among some conservative commentators. The *Spectator* warned that it would undermine the principle of cohesion that rooted leadership and institutions within a healthy social organism and secured the proper functioning of what Fairlie and other conservative thinkers had previously referred to (in a positive sense) as “establishments”.<sup>99</sup> This argument had been applied to Galbraith’s account of “affluence” in *Crossbow* just before the 1959 election, in an extended article by David Fairbairn warning that this new economic dispensation would create “a large genus of

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<sup>96</sup> R.M. Titmuss, *The Irresponsible Society*, Fabian tract 323 (London, 1960); idem, “The Irresponsible Society”, *The Listener* 11 August 1960, 207-8.

<sup>97</sup> *The Responsible Society* (London, 1959), 7-9 (quotation at 7).

<sup>98</sup> Middleton, ““Affluence””, 116-17.

<sup>99</sup> “Never So Good?”, *Spectator* 15 January 1960, 63. Fairlie had raised similar concerns before the election: Fairlie, “The British Radical”, 877.



people whose roots go deep into no established pattern of living, who are uncommitted to any firmly held beliefs”.<sup>100</sup> Fairbairn suggested that “affluence” in this sense would place excessive power in the hands of advertising and marketing interests, creating “an establishment whose aims [...] run counter to those of society at large.”<sup>101</sup> In other words, rather than harmonising the interests of society in the way that quasi-Burkean usages of “the establishment” presupposed, this new “establishment” would enable a single section of the community to impose its interests on the whole, which Fairbairn therefore urged conservatives to forestall.

By early 1961 the problems posed by expanding consumption had also brought another balance-of-payments crisis into prospect. The *Spectator* began to advocate British entry into the European Economic Community as a way of averting “gradual political and economic decline” – a conceptualisation of British economic performance that new forms of economic measurement, and influential books by the financial journalists Andrew Shonfield and Michael Shanks, were helping to construct, in a sense broadly consistent with the analyses of economic performance that we have seen Wilson and Balogh had been developing since the late 1950s.<sup>102</sup> In July 1961 Selwyn Lloyd announced a package of deflationary measures, the most notable of which was a “pay pause” for public sector workers which, insofar as it constituted an attempt to impose pay restraint without union support, ran counter to the claim that Utley and other conservative commentators had made since the late 1950s, that conservative government was uniquely capable of transforming the

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<sup>100</sup> David Fairbairn, “Production without end?”, *Crossbow* Autumn 1959, 33.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>102</sup> “The European Idea”, *Spectator* 2 June 1961, 783; Tomlinson, “Inventing ‘Decline’”; Andrew Shonfield, *British Economic Policy Since the War* (Harmondsworth, 1958); Michael Shanks, *The Stagnant Society: A Warning* (Harmondsworth, 1961).

unions into “establishments”. This marked the point at which it was soon widely agreed that the Government’s reputation for economic competence had been lost;<sup>103</sup> but it was also the point at which the criticisms of economic policy and performance that Wilson and Balogh had been issuing since the mid-1950s gained wide credibility. This was partly because the “pay pause” constituted tacit recognition by the Government that some form of wage control was the prerequisite for continually rising consumption, while its attempt to impose such an arrangement without union support meant that the Conservative Party was no longer quite so obviously the most plausible agent of Britain’s transition into that economic future. A *Spectator* editorial criticised “Mr. Lloyd’s failure even to try to carry the trade unions with him”, and the paper’s City correspondent Nicholas Davenport lamented that Lloyd “chose to have an industrial war” in accordance with the preferred policy of “the Treasury establishment” – an adoption of the polemical usage that Balogh and Wilson had been deploying since the mid-1950s.<sup>104</sup> That war was enthusiastically joined by Cousins, who scornfully rejected pay restraint at the 1961 Labour Party Conference. Meanwhile, the *New Statesman* gleefully pointed out that by antagonising “white-collar” unions “the government is [...] making itself enemies in precisely the social stratum where ‘modern’ Conservatism won votes for Tory MPs.”<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> See, for example, William Rees-Mogg, “The Tories: Survival or Revival?”, *Sunday Times* 1 April 1962, 25; Beau Giles, “Bow Notebook”, *Crossbow* July – September 1962, 9.

<sup>104</sup> “Into the Club”, *Spectator* 4 August 1961, 160; Nicholas Davenport, “Three Wiser Men”, *ibid.*, 182. See also Davenport’s derision of “the fuddy-duddy establishment at the Treasury” in “A Treasury Obsession?”, *Spectator* 2 June 1961, 809.

<sup>105</sup> “White-Collar Militants”, *New Statesman* 25 August 1961, 233.

This sense of weakening support for the Government among the new middle class was also shared within a Conservative Party that was now becoming the target of new pejorative usages of “the Establishment” outside formal political commentary and debate. One of its newly-elected MPs, Charles Curran, warned *Crossbow* readers that the limitations upon its appeal to the “new” middle class included the fact that:

The party sometimes conveys an impression that it is, in essence, a non-stop Old Boys reunion, conducted against a background of nannies, dorms, housemasters, pheasants, swords, and grandfathers who got themselves shot on the North-West Frontier as a prelude to immortality on the walls of Clifton Chapel.<sup>106</sup>

This faintly comical admonition echoed the satirical revue *Beyond the Fringe*, which had opened in London in May 1961 shortly before the “pay pause” was announced, and whose most remarked-upon features included Peter Cook’s impersonation of Harold Macmillan. The assimilation of this revue within political culture had become apparent within a month, when the *Spectator* reported that Macmillan’s “bumbling speech of welcome” on President Kennedy’s arrival in the UK was given “from notes, as if he were trying to parody *Beyond the Fringe*”.<sup>107</sup> Later in the year Cook opened a nightclub for satirical comedy in Soho called “The Establishment”, which Jonathan Miller, another member of the cast of *Beyond the Fringe*, presented in *The Observer* as part of an assault on the overlapping networks of official and social power in which the norms of Victorian

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<sup>106</sup> Charles Curran, “The new model bourgeoisie”, *Crossbow* October-December 1962, 23.

<sup>107</sup> “Kennedy’s Travels”, *Spectator* 9 June 1961, 824.

public-school culture prevailed.<sup>108</sup> Meanwhile, the Conservatives' loss of support among the "new" middle class was also a central motif in discussions of a "Liberal revival", which were already current when *The Establishment* opened in Soho in October 1961 and which were seemingly corroborated in a run of by-elections the following year, in which the Liberals' appeal as an anti-"Establishment" or protest party was widely perceived to have worked against the Conservatives.<sup>109</sup>

The pay pause also heralded a shift in the Government's approach to the role of the state in the economy that was difficult to accommodate within the parameters of a political appeal that had long been framed by the slogan "Conservative freedom works."<sup>110</sup> Shortly before the "pay pause" was announced the Conservative writer and politician Peter Goldman had claimed in a restatement of Conservative ideals that "Conservatives are the traditional foes of centralisation, the traditional champions of the diffusion of power", and characterised "Socialism" as seeking "to expand the areas within which the gentleman in Whitehall is deemed to know best".<sup>111</sup> Shortly after the "pay pause" was announced *Crossbow*, edited at the time by Geoffrey Howe, warned that "Tories can no longer laugh off the need for economic planning by deriding Mr Douglas Jay's observation that 'The gentleman in Whitehall knows best'".<sup>112</sup> The Government accordingly set

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<sup>108</sup> Jonathan Miller, "Can English Satire Draw Blood?", *The Observer* 1 October 1961, 21.

<sup>109</sup> Kenneth Baker, "A Liberal Revival?", *Crossbow* Autumn 1961, 41-44; Anthony Howard, "The Message of Orpington", *New Statesman* 16 March 1962, 358; David Marquand, "The Liberal Revival", *Encounter* July 1962, 63-67.

<sup>110</sup> This slogan had been used in Conservative poster campaigns throughout the 1950s, before being employed in the 1959 manifesto: Craig, *British General Election Manifestos*, 188.

<sup>111</sup> Peter Goldman, *Some Principles of Conservatism* (London, 1956; revised ed. 1961), 10.

<sup>112</sup> "Editorial: What is to be done?", *Crossbow* Autumn 1961, 6.

up new institutional machinery for planning economic output and wages, and initiated many of the “modernising” reforms that were later pursued by Wilson’s Labour governments; but the weakness of those mechanisms, and particularly the T.U.C.’s refusal to join the National Incomes Council, enabled Labour to claim that it alone was capable of securing the unions’ co-operation in national economic management – that is, to identify itself with the political nation without appearing to sacrifice its radicalism.<sup>113</sup> In October 1962 Wilson declared that the unions would refuse to support an incomes policy without (in effect) the adoption of Labour’s current fiscal policy; and claimed that the Government’s attempts at planning were insufficiently “*dirigiste*”, a term whose positive connotations at this stage mark a major shift from the political culture of the 1950s.<sup>114</sup>

However, Labour did not automatically benefit from the Government’s confrontation with the unions and what was believed to be its weakening appeal to the “new” middle class, partly because it was not itself altogether immune to the much-discussed Liberal revival.<sup>115</sup> When Hugh Gaitskell sought to consolidate the internal unity of the Labour Party by announcing his opposition to the Government’s application in September 1962, the Conservative Party chairman Iain Macleod confidently predicted that it would cost Labour the next election, by alienating middle-

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<sup>113</sup> On the Conservative Government’s anticipation of the “modernising” initiatives of the subsequent Labour governments, see Jim Tomlinson, “Conservative Modernisation, 1960-64: Too Little, Too Late?”, *Contemporary British History* 11 no.3 (1997), 18-38.

<sup>114</sup> Harold Wilson, “Planning in a Vacuum”, *New Statesman* 26 October 1962, 558.

<sup>115</sup> This was noted at the time in, for example, William Rees-Mogg, “The Tories: Survival or Revival?”, *Sunday Times* 1 April 1962, 25.

class voters who were presumed to support EEC entry.<sup>116</sup> Even when this prediction was confounded by de Gaulle's veto of the application the following January, Harold Wilson—who became Labour leader in February 1963, after Gaitskell's sudden death from lupus—faced what was thought to be the delicate strategic imperative of maintaining the fragile unity of the labour movement whilst securing support among the “new” middle class. The distinctive public doctrine that he articulated before the 1964 election was addressed to this apparent dilemma. Drawing together the conceptual resources that “affluence”, the rediscovery of poverty and Titmuss's critique of “irresponsible” power had made available, Wilson's rhetoric identified the Conservative Party with the vulgarised sense of “the Establishment” that was increasingly prevalent in popular culture, which he associated with privilege, amateurism, backwardness and, not infrequently, “effete”-ness – in contrast to the modernised polity he proposed to create through the incorporation of both the unions and the “new” technical and scientific middle class, freeing industry from the constraints supposedly imposed by traditional social elites.

Wilson began developing this pattern of rhetorical contrasts shortly after his election as Labour leader, claiming amid the exposure of the Admiralty official John Vassall as a Soviet spy, for example, that “the gentlemanly posture of the Establishment” was no match for the “ruthless, highly professionalized” Soviet security services.<sup>117</sup> The scandal that was created over the Conservative minister John Profumo's brief affair with Christine Keeler, with its origins at Cliveden and its suggestion of ruling-class social mores running counter to the national interest,

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<sup>116</sup> Anthony Howard, “Dawn over Llandudno”, *New Statesman* 12 October 1962, 474. Howard had previously presented E.E.C. entry as a favoured policy of the new middle class in “The New Loyalists”, *New Statesman* 28 September 1962, 390.

<sup>117</sup> “Mr. H. Wilson: security presented as a leaky vessel”, *The Times* 8 May 1963, 6.

evoked both the circumstances in which Fairlie was believed to have re-coined “the Establishment” in 1955 and the spectre of “the Cliveden set” to which the new concept had been related in its earliest uses. But the main elements of Wilson’s political appeal and his usage of “the Establishment” no longer relied upon their continuity with the vocabulary in which power and authority had been contested since the late 1930s, as initial pejorative usages of “the Establishment” in the mid-1950s had done. Instead, his celebrated speeches at the Labour Party conference of 1963 used “the Establishment” with distinctively contemporary meanings. His speech on foreign policy, for example, ridiculed the Earl of Home (then foreign secretary) as the representative of an “effete Establishment” and declared that:

This country cannot put forth its true strength until it cuts out the dead wood at the top [...] till it frees itself from the dead hands of the Establishment and the mesmerism of the old school tie, the nepotism and dynasticism which are as out of place in modern industry as they are in modern government.<sup>118</sup>

The same themes were struck in Wilson’s oft-cited speech on “the scientific revolution” the following day, which derided “the old-boy network approach to life” and the continuing influence in industry of “men whose only claim is their aristocratic connections or the power of inherited wealth or speculative finance”.<sup>119</sup> On this latter point Wilson adopted a view of the integration of social elites and industrial leadership that was broadly consistent with the analyses of power undertaken by the New Left and contrary to Crosland’s opposing account, as well as to that given

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<sup>118</sup> Harold Wilson, *Purpose in Politics: Selected Speeches* (London, 1964), 7; 12.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 14; 28.

by the journalist Anthony Sampson in his influential book *Anatomy of Britain* (1962).<sup>120</sup> However, the plausibility of Wilson's usage of "the Establishment" as Labour leader relied not upon its empirical accuracy, but upon its synthesis of the conceptual vocabulary that had emerged in Labour politics after the 1959 election, and upon its congruence with the new discursive template within which other forms of traditional authority—particularly that of the religious "Establishment"—were being called into question in 1963.<sup>121</sup> It was undoubtedly reinforced by the accession of Home to the premiership in October that year, which Wilson greeted by demanding "How can a scion of an effete establishment appreciate and understand, above all read [*sic*] the scientific revolution, the mobilization of the skill and talents of all our people in the struggle to restore Britain's position in the world?"<sup>122</sup> But it had already been formulated before that event, and was largely unaffected by it.

Although Wilson's politics was therefore directed against "the Establishment" in the particular sense of that term that he had developed, it did not employ the populist, pejorative sense of "the Establishment" that had emerged in Labour commentary after Suez: he proposed to change the personnel and ethos of the British state, not to formally democratise it by preventing networks of power and influence from controlling its centre (except insofar as the unions constituted a locus of "responsible", or democratically-accountable, power in the terms that Titmuss had influentially

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<sup>120</sup> Anthony Sampson, *Anatomy of Britain* (London, 1962), 632.

<sup>121</sup> Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation, 1800-2000* (London, 2001), ch.8; Sam Brewitt-Taylor, "The Invention of a 'Secular Society'? Christianity and the Sudden Appearance of Secularization Discourses in the British National Media, 1961-4", *Twentieth Century British History* 24 no.3 (2013), 327-50.

<sup>122</sup> "Labour Would Reject Move to Postpone M.P.s' Return," *The Times* 21 October 1963, 6. See also "The 'true' aristocracy at Kinross", *The Guardian* 5 November 1963, 2.



established). His proposal to integrate the trade unions more fully into national economic management was implicitly endorsed at the Trades Union Congress in September 1963, where a motion by the boilermakers' union rejecting any form of wage restraint was accompanied by the observations of the Union's general secretary as to the implacable opposition of Conservative governments to trade unions; by contrast, he declared, "if we have a Labour Government in power, and it wants assistance from our movement to achieve a planned economy, I shall be one of the first in this room to pledge my support."<sup>123</sup> At the Labour Party conference the following month, union leaders re-stated their opposition to wage restraint under a future Labour government, but the amity between the party and the unions was repeatedly emphasised.<sup>124</sup> Just under a year later, Wilson launched Labour's general election campaign with a speech at the Trades Union Congress at Brighton, which included a passing reference to "the complacent mythology of the Establishment" concerning the possibility of increasing exports without planning.<sup>125</sup> By now this aspect of Wilson's rhetoric had become characteristic, and its effectiveness was ruefully acknowledged by conservative commentators.<sup>126</sup> The final pre-election issue of *Crossbow* carried a review of anthologies of speeches by Wilson and Home, which complained that Wilson "repeatedly attacks the Tories as upholding a quite fictional 'Edwardian establishment mentality'".<sup>127</sup> But the fictionality of Wilson's usage of this term did not diminish its political force;

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<sup>123</sup> "Three T.U.C. Votes on Wages—Narrow Majority for Complete Opposition to Restraint", *The Times* 5 September 1963, 6.

<sup>124</sup> "Huge Labour Conference Majority for Planned Economy", *The Times* 3 October 1963, 16.

<sup>125</sup> "'Seize Chances To Expand Production', Mr. Wilson tells the T.U.C. Delegates", *The Times* 8 September 1964, 14.

<sup>126</sup> For example in Russell Lewis, "Planning within a free economy", *Crossbow* July-September 1964, 20.

<sup>127</sup> Lionel H. Grouse, "Right, Left, Right?", *Crossbow* October-December 1964, 54.

and there may have been some acknowledgement of this in the same reviewer's only partially disparaging statement that Wilson "is equally persuasive at first glance and specious at second".<sup>128</sup>

## VI

Wilson continued to pursue this rhetorical strategy after Labour's narrow victory in 1964, in order to maintain his government's radical credentials. At the Labour Party conference the following year he declared that the election had been, among other things, "a decision that [...] every aspect of our national life that has been corrupted by the doctrine of a self-perpetuating establishment, should give way to a more open society where knowing your job would mean more than knowing the right people."<sup>129</sup> Meanwhile, he attempted to make good on his implicit promise to incorporate organised labour into the polity by giving ministerial office to Frank Cousins, and by restoring the legal immunities that had been taken from the unions in the *Rookes v. Barnard* judgement of 1964. (Introducing the latter measure in the House of Commons, the Minister of Labour reflected that "There were few half a century ago who believed that the trade union movement would become almost a part of the Establishment", a development which he claimed would produce "greater efficiency and greater order" – a marked contrast to the sense in which we have seen the unions were accused of complicity with "the Establishment" in Labour commentary during the mid-1950s.)<sup>130</sup> Wilson's self-presentation was sufficiently credible for the *Observer's* political

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<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>129</sup> Harold Wilson, "Speech at the Labour Party Annual Conference, Blackpool, 28 September 1965" in Wilson, *Purpose in Power: Selected Speeches by Harold Wilson* (Boston, 1966), 134.

<sup>130</sup> "Unions' right to threaten strikes", *The Times* 17 February 1965, 18.

correspondent to describe him, in a favourable comparison with the newly-elected Conservative leader Edward Heath, as having “refused either to adapt his way of life or personal standards to fit into the establishment pattern”; even *The Times*, whose political correspondent by contrast implied that Heath’s election to the leadership had invalidated the association of the Conservative Party with “the Establishment” that Wilson had successfully employed, described the preparation of the National Plan as having been “surrounded by a hostile Whitehall establishment.”<sup>131</sup> Yet even before the 1966 election the idea of “the Establishment” began to be directed *against* Wilson by critics who claimed that, in office, his radicalism had fallen short of his rhetoric. Just before polling day, *The Guardian*’s financial editor accused the Labour Party of “behaving like the Establishment” insofar as Wilson and other party leaders appeared to “feel compelled to stick to relatively meaningless phrases” in the election campaign.<sup>132</sup> This usage was adopted in 1966-67 by the self-identifying “Left” of the party, and perhaps more damagingly by proponents of the modernising socialism with which Wilson had aligned himself before the 1964 election.<sup>133</sup> (The concept of “affluence” was likewise turned against Wilson by his avowedly socialist critics at around the same time.)<sup>134</sup> Wilson himself may have helped to validate this criticism by his presentation of the seamen’s strike of 1966 as a confrontation between the unions and the state, which prompted

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<sup>131</sup> Nora Beloff, “In Search of Edward Heath”, *The Observer* 1 August 1965, 9; “A New Image for Conservatism”, *The Times* 29 July 1965, 11; “A Useful Blueprint for the Next Five Years”, *The Times* 4 October 1965, iv.

<sup>132</sup> William Davis, “A yawn? This is no parlour game”, *The Guardian* 23 March 1966, 15. See also, from a non-Labour perspective, “The Art of Keeping Issues Out of Politics”, *The Times* 5 July 1965, 7.

<sup>133</sup> See, for example, Alan Watkins, “Labour in Power” in *The Left*, ed. Gerald Kaufman (London, 1966), 170, 176; Michael Shanks, *Is Britain Viable?* Fabian tract 378 (London, 1967), 14.

<sup>134</sup> Middleton, ““Affluence””, 127-30.

Cousins to resign.<sup>135</sup> Amid the tacit abandonment of the National Plan that ensued, the credibility of Wilson's promise to create a new polity was severely diminished.

Meanwhile the idea of "the Establishment" acquired other meanings that reflected, and helped to accomplish, a larger shifting of political alignments. The term was adopted by Heath's conservative critics to indicate that his policies conformed too closely to those of the Labour government – particularly after Enoch Powell's infamous speech on immigration in 1967 created an issue around which an ostensibly popular conservatism could be defined.<sup>136</sup> Powell, *The Times's* economics editor Peter Jay wrote in May 1968, "is now a major political phenomenon. He is seen by many as making a bid for power over the heads of the political establishment direct to the people", in opposition to "the illusion-ridden, bi-partisan consensus of the past few years."<sup>137</sup> By then the idea of a "new" or "progressive establishment" was also gaining currency among critics of the social and cultural processes of the 1960s, which in its adoption by conservative commentators could imply a kind of usurpation of the authority exercised by "establishments" in the proper sense, threatening the integrity of the nation as a moral community.<sup>138</sup> Amid these discussions of a "new Establishment" loosely associated with the Labour governments, the idea that Labour was becoming the "natural party of government" also entered political discourse.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Keir Thorpe, "The 'Juggernaut Method': The 1966 State of Emergency and the Wilson Government's Response to the Seamen's Strike", *Twentieth Century British History* 12 no.4 (2001), 464.

<sup>136</sup> See for example Nora Beloff, "Will Enoch Powell save Harold Wilson?", *The Observer* 16 June 1968, 5; "PHS", "The Times Diary", *The Times* 16 June 1970, 10.

<sup>137</sup> Peter Jay, "Powell's theory of inflation: a false premise", *The Times* 16 May 1968, 32.

<sup>138</sup> The currency of the idea of a "progressive establishment" is noted in Robinson, *Languages of Progressive Politics*, 180-3.

<sup>139</sup> An early usage appeared in "Was it a Watershed?", *Economist* 9 April 1966, 120-21.

Pimlott claims that Wilson himself adopted this phrase in 1969, in which context it supported his claim to the political “centre” and underpinned his attempts to reform trade union law through the White Paper *In Place of Strife*, by identifying the Government’s proposals with the national interest.<sup>140</sup> After the proposals were effectively rejected by the unions, the phrase could also tacitly rebut suggestions that the incident demonstrated the Government’s inability to govern, and buttress Wilson’s demands for party discipline – much as descriptions of Labour as an “alternative government” had done in the 1950s.<sup>141</sup>

It could also still evoke a sense that Labour was uniquely competent to manage a quasi-corporatist polity with the unions, for as long as the “social contract” under which the miners’ strike was ended in 1974 continued to function.<sup>142</sup> However, the risks of this rhetorical strategy became evident at the Conservative Party conference of 1975 when, as more conventional politicians contested Wilson’s claim that Labour was “the natural party of government”, the new Conservative leader actually endorsed it.<sup>143</sup> “If we are to be told that a Conservative Government could not govern because certain extreme leaders would not let it”, Margaret Thatcher declared, “then General Elections are a mockery and we’ve arrived at the one party state, and parliamentary

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<sup>140</sup> Pimlott, *Harold Wilson*, 552; “Door open for union reforms, Wilson says”, *The Times* 5 May 1969, 8; David Wood, “The tactics of compromise”, *The Times* 12 May 1969, 10.

<sup>141</sup> “Mr Wilson’s warning that big pay deals might lead to unemployment”, *The Times* 29 November 1974, 8; “Wilson grasps the prize but pays the price”, *The Guardian* 1 October 1975, 1.

<sup>142</sup> See, for example, “Mr Wilson appeals for regeneration of the ‘natural party of government’”, *The Times* 1 October 1975, 5.

<sup>143</sup> For examples of its contestation see “Censure Call”, *The Guardian* 9 October 1975, 7; “New social climate needed to cure Britain’s malaise”, *ibid.*, 7.

democracy in this country will have perished.”<sup>144</sup> This opened the way to Thatcher’s usage of “the Establishment”, in the sense of a “left-socialist oligarchy restraining the natural acquisitiveness of ‘free-born’ Britons”, as it has been described.<sup>145</sup> (In a kind of historical irony, the conditions for the credibility of Thatcher’s new anti-“Establishment” politics had been created by the emergence, in the form of the shop stewards’ movement, of the “militant, democratic trade unionism” that *Tribune* had supported against what it presented as the trade union “establishment” during the 1950s.) Of course the actual arrangements whereby Wilson could claim to be making Labour the “natural party of government” were more precarious than Thatcher made them sound, but the significance of her re-positioning was instantly recognised by contemporaries. “No part of her speech”, the political editor of *The Times* stated immediately afterwards, “had deeper political significance than her challenge to Mr Wilson’s claim [...] that Labour, underpinned by trade union power, is now the natural party of government.”<sup>146</sup>

It has been argued that a transition took place in British politics during or after the 1970s, wherein the traditional opposition of “conservatism” and “socialism” was supplanted by more complex clusters of ideas loosely bound together within “New Rights and Lefts” – a development that can also be related to larger transitions effected by identity politics and new social movements,

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<sup>144</sup> “Speech to Conservative Party Conference” 10 October 1975, Margaret Thatcher Foundation website, [www.margaretthatcher.org/document/102777](http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/102777) (accessed 5 March 2019).

<sup>145</sup> Jon Lawrence & Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, “Margaret Thatcher and the Decline of Class Politics” in Jackson and Saunders, eds., *Making Thatcher’s Britain*, 143. Thatcher’s use of “the Establishment” has been discussed in slightly more detail in Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, *Class, Politics and the Decline of Deference in Britain, 1968-2000* (Oxford, 2018), ch.7 & Conclusion.

<sup>146</sup> David Wood, “Mrs Thatcher defines new mood for Tory politics”, *The Times* 11 October 1975, 1.

and by the contradictory impulses of neoliberal political economy.<sup>147</sup> The history traced in this article suggests that an important political transition did become evident in Britain during that period, but that it had begun during the 1950s and that it was associated with a new conceptual vocabulary of which “the Establishment” was a central component. The close analysis of that vocabulary which this article has presented suggests that the political economy and institutions that emerged from the 1940s did not appear as a stable or finished settlement to more than a few political actors and commentators; and that contestations of the scope and implications of the reforms of that decade effected what we might advisedly call a “reconstruction” of political argument in Britain, the effects of which became evident from the late 1950s. In 1959, as we saw, demands for more radical social-democratic (and, still more, socialist) measures were checked by the credibility of suggestions that the reforms of the 1940s had created new centres of power that were constraining Britain’s political and economic development. The re-orientation of political argument that took place around the “pay pause” of 1961 produced Wilson’s political appeal of 1963-4, in which “the Establishment” was the antithesis of a modernising, quasi-corporatist social democracy that his administration would inaugurate; but this usage of “the Establishment” validated only a limited programme of reform aimed at escaping the supposed constraints of an aristocratic amateurism in industry and the state, the actual existence of which may have been questionable but which was nonetheless congruent with the larger cultural context of the early 1960s.

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<sup>147</sup> Rodney Barker, “Political ideas since 1945, or how long was the twentieth century?”, *Contemporary British History* 10, no.1 (1996), 2-19 (quotation at 7). On the larger fragmentations, Steven Lukes, “Epilogue: The grand dichotomy of the twentieth century”, in *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Political Thought*, ed. Terence Ball & Richard Bellamy (Cambridge, 2003), 602-26.

At this point political argument in Britain had been partially re-aligned around an opposition between “modern-minded” and “old-fashioned” political appeals, which *The Economist* recognised after Wilson’s victory in the general election of 1966 (and which thus preceded the class and partisan “dealignment” of the electorate during the 1970s).<sup>148</sup> But Wilson’s mastery of this change in the terms of political debate proved unsustainable in office, where his distinctive political appeal ultimately foreshortened the horizons of social-democratic reform by making the Labour Party appear as a new “Establishment” that could be held responsible for the economic and social problems of the 1970s. Thatcher’s adoption, as Conservative leader, of an anti-“Establishment” appeal in this sense also marked a significant transformation within conservatism. We have seen here that one ideal of conservative politics which “the Establishment” had been used to promote in post-war Britain envisaged political contention giving way to the restoration of what Utley called “a balance of interests in society”.<sup>149</sup> Thatcher’s adoption of an anti-“Establishment” appeal explicitly opposed to what she portrayed as the prevailing political settlement, and her disavowal of “consensus” politics and of the “middle way” that Utley had claimed to seek, heralded the marginalisation of this form of conservatism (as Utley himself appears to have recognised).<sup>150</sup> The economic and social policies that were eventually pursued by the Thatcher administrations also stood in an uneasy relationship to a conservatism that rooted

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<sup>148</sup> “Was it a Watershed?”, 121. On “dealignment” see, most recently, David Denver and Mark Garnett, *British General Elections since 1964: Diversity, Dealignment, and Disillusion* (Oxford, 2014), ch.3, esp. 67-72.

<sup>149</sup> Utley, *Not Guilty*, 36.

<sup>150</sup> See, for example, “TV Interview for Thames TV *This Week*” 5 February 1976, Margaret Thatcher Foundation website, <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/102953> (accessed 3 April 2020); “Speech to Conservative Rally in Cardiff” 16 April 1979, Margaret Thatcher Foundation website <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104011> (accessed 3 April 2020); Stapleton, “T.E. Utley”, 221.



political institutions within a densely-structured ethical order, which we have seen was discussed in terms of “establishments” during the early 1960s.<sup>151</sup>

The formation and development of the concept of “the Establishment” is therefore a central part of the history of political argument in Britain since 1945. From its initial re-coining in conservative commentary during the 1950s, the diverse usages of the term were part of a vigorous contestation of power and authority in post-war Britain, the scope and purposes of which are brought into focus when the concept is properly historicised. As we have seen here, most of those usages were developed in answer to the vexed questions of what kind of polity had emerged from the 1940s, and of the extent of the transformation that had been wrought over the decade during which it became conventional to refer to Britain as a “welfare state”. The current article suggests that the transition of *this* term from an actor’s to an historian’s category also requires greater critical scrutiny than it has hitherto received: as other historians have pointed out, conceptions of post-war Britain as a “welfare state” conceal the actual configuration of interests and resources within the state apparatus, and the developments in political argument that have been examined here indicate that the “welfare state” in Britain was not a stable political settlement, but a term that was applied to a set of policies and institutions that were less complete and coherent than it made them appear.<sup>152</sup> Distinguishing between the development of those policies and institutions, and the vocabulary in which their scope and significance was contested, therefore appears as a fundamental requirement for understanding British politics during the twentieth century.

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<sup>151</sup> Camilla Schofield, “‘A nation or no nation?’ Enoch Powell and Thatcherism” in Jackson and Saunders, eds., *Making Thatcher’s Britain*, 95-110.

<sup>152</sup> David Edgerton, *Warfare State: Britain, 1920-1970* (Cambridge, 2006).