

Remembering Margaret Thatcher, with Loathing

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The execrable Maggie Thatcher, erstwhile British prime minister, passed on April 8 with much rending of clothing by her nation's Right but with something approaching joy by much of the nation's rest. The following sendoff appears in the Summer 2013 Democratic Left, minus its last graf slapping the endlessly slappable Slavoj Zizek for writing that the Left could learn from her. (Something had to be cut, even if he deserved the slap.) I wrote her exit evaluation in the spirit of Moms Mabley, who observed that while "you should say nothing but good about the dead; she dead. Good!" And at Britain's Glastonbury Festival, in late June, singer-songwriter Elvis Costello performed his Tramp the Dirt Down in another proper remembrance of her. Costello reportedly told the audience at his hour-long set that while he would not wish death by dementia on anyone, "The things she did to this country are still being done today....It's not about burying someone underground, it's about burying an idea in the ground."

As minister for education in the early 1970s Tory government she was labeled "Thatcher the Milk Snatcher" for curtailing free milk to school children.

That was a foretaste of Margaret Thatcher as the United Kingdom's prime minister from 1979 to 1990, whose new-model austerity regime auctioned off public housing and bled the nation's cost-free health care and school systems. She cowed the unions, jailed militant strikers, and forced the layoff of hundreds of thousands of workers as she shuttered or sold for parts state-owned steel mills, coal mines and rail lines from Lands End in southwestern England to John o'Groats in Scotland's far north.

Thatcher backed every imperial adventure of three U.S. presidents, plus one of her own—the war with Argentina over the Falkland Islands. That martial drumming got her wobbly government re-elected, a stunt British writer Warren Ellis called "the most shameless, vote-grabbing, artificial war scam in 50 years."

Thatcher was the first European leader to abandon even a rhetorical commitment to cooperation with the trade unions. She jettisoned the then-prevailing conservative vision of a social market, which even the continent's Christian Democrats endorsed. Long considered the architect of a bloodless neoliberalism—the corporate ideology of laissez-faire economics that boosts privatizing state-owned properties (usually at fire-sale prices), shrinking social services, prizing inequitable flat taxes over fair tariffs on business and the over-privileged, and blocking workers' rights to organize collectively—she was more appropriately its first grand mason. She would shortly be followed by Ronald Reagan in the United States, but never exceeded.

"The Iron Lady" is best-known for three chilling pronouncements. She referred to the then imprisoned Nelson Mandela as "a common terrorist," when the anti-apartheid leader was neither terroristic nor common. Her oft-quoted "There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families," translated as denying the need for social welfare provision or collective responsibility. There was no social world in her cosmology. And her bluster that "there is no alternative" to capitalism was a taunt to the poor and cast-off to suck it up.

If Reagan's affect was as the kindly, if quackish, horse doctor administering strong medicine, Thatcher's was Ken Kesey's coldly brutal Nurse Ratchet. Her challenge to doubters in her own party, whom she derided as "wets," was "You turn if you want to. The lady's not for turning."

Predictably, she presided over an explosion in income inequality, something whose growth slowed under succeeding Labour governments and is galloping again under the present Tory regime. Out of office, when asked to name her greatest achievement, she responded "New Labour," a reference to how Labour's Blair and Brown governments that followed nearly two decades of Tory rule echoed her key economic policies, *sans* much of the brusqueness and ill-will that marked her own reign.

In the end, she was formally undone by her own Tory parliamentary majority. Facing mass demonstrations and crashing poll numbers over her plan for a widely disliked flat "poll tax" and internal disagreements over closer monetary integration with the European Union, Thatcher was made to understand her party risked losing the next election with her as leader. So the "grocer's daughter," whose humble-like background she made much off despite her Oxbridge education and posh accent,, resigned in 1990 to a life of leisure as Baroness Thatcher and the great good friend of an actual terrorist, Chile's Augusto Pinochet.

Her death on April 8 at age 87 from advanced dementia—she was then living at The Ritz, London's toniest hotel—was received variously. The current Tory government, despite crying poor-mouth over public spending, arranged a state funeral at a cost of some \$16 million in public funds, while a hurriedly called House of Commons congress spent six hours beatifying her. Prime Minister Cameron applauded her as "not a consensus politician but a conviction politician" and one who "didn't just lead our country, she saved our country." The scabrous *Daily Mail* aped Cameron in naming her "The Woman Who Saved Britain." Even President Obama larded it on, noting in classic Orwellian that "The world has lost one of the great champions of freedom and liberty, and America has lost a true friend."

Elsewhere on the Sceptered Isle, it was party time, with champagne and all-night dancing in the streets. Those living in England's North, hardest hit by her and successive administrations' industrial closings, were said to party the heartiest. In Northern Ireland's Derry, a sign read "Iron Lady, rust in peace." "Ding Dong! The Witch is Dead" was among the most requested songs on Spotify and Pandora, placing second among commercial downloads in the U.K.

It wasn't all biliousness from the Left. Some were even covetous. Writing in *The New Statesman*, boutique Marxian philosopher Slavoj Zizek applauded her attack-dog certitude, likening her to a "master" who, ideology aside, is a fit political model in forcing a soft citizenry to do right, or in our case, Left. "The large majority—me included," he writes, "*wants* to be passive and rely on an efficient state apparatus to guarantee the smooth running of the entire social edifice, so that I can pursue my work in peace." Zizek disputes the democratic ethic that voters know what they want. "No, they don't," Zizek insists, "and they don't want to know it. They need a good elite, which is why a proper politician does not only advocate people's interests, it is through him that they discover what they 'really want'." So much for Marx's self-emancipation of the working class.

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