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The ontological failure of David Cameron's 'modernisation' of the Conservative Party

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Abstract

David Cameron's leadership of the Conservatives took as its starting point the assumption that the party needed to modernise, requiring a move towards the political 'centre ground'. This shift presented the party leadership with a series of challenges, including brand detoxification, party management, and policy renewal. Modernisation also implied ideological change, to distance the Conservatives from the legacy of Thatcherism and realign conservatism with the values of a wider section of the electorate. In this respect Cameronite modernisation can be judged a failure. This article suggests that ontological contradictions inherent in central elements of Cameron's conservatism, specifically the 'Big Society' and the 'social justice agenda' fatally undermined its ideological coherence. It argues that this is an important and hitherto overlooked part of the explanation for the shortcomings of Conservative Party modernisation as a political project. Although this is only one part in a wider explanation for the failure of Conservative modernisation, this case study demonstrates that ontological assumptions matter in political practice.

Introduction

In 2005, after three successive general election defeats, the Conservative Party turned to David Cameron to be its next leader. Cameron offered himself as a candidate for the role on the proviso that the party must 'change to win'. If they wanted a return to their election-winning ways of the past, the Conservatives, he insisted in his speech to the 2005 party conference, must 'modernise our culture and attitudes and identity'. He went on: 'When I say change, I'm not talking about some slick re-branding exercise. What I'm talking about is fundamental change… that shows we're comfortable with modern Britain' (Cameron, 2005a). Cameron's prescription for Conservative modernisation consequently suggested that the party faced a critical disjuncture between its outlook and that of contemporary society. This had to be bridged if the Conservative Party was once again to compete for power. In particular, the modernisers suggested that societal attitudes had shifted decisively in a socially liberal direction, and that the Conservatives needed to embrace such values if they were to be seen as a credible alternative to Labour and the Liberal Democrats by floating voters in key marginal seats. This strategy demanded changes not only to policy but also to the party's tone and rhetoric. Organisational reform was required to modernise the party in terms of its candidate selection, to make it more socially representative, particularly of women and ethnic minorities (Dorey, 2007: 153). Most fundamentally, modernisation implied ideological repositioning towards the political centre ground, and a break with the legacy of Thatcherism (Hayton, 2016). Cameron consequently advocated what he variously labelled 'compassionate', 'progressive', 'modern', and 'liberal' conservatism, and declined to describe himself as a Thatcherite when invited to do so.

Cameron's modernisation project fulfilled its primary objective in that it returned the Conservatives to power. Although the party was unable to secure an overall majority at the 2010 election, it's reorientation towards the political centre and in an ostensibly more liberal direction made the formation of the Coalition government with the Liberal Democrats possible. At the time, this dramatic moment was hailed by some as the start of a decisive political realignment driven by the modernisers, but by the end of the Cameron era most academic assessments of Conservative modernisation agreed that the project largely failed to deliver on its initial promise, with a lack of ideological coherence identified as an important factor (Kerr and Hayton, 2015). This article examines this by seeking to expose the ontological assumptions at the heart of Cameron's conservatism, arguing that contradictions

between those assumptions fatally compromised the ideational basis of Conservative modernisation. Therefore, although contradictions between ideas are one part of a wider explanation for the failure of the Conservative modernisation project, they played an important role in fundamentally limiting the integrity of that project.

The article proceeds in the following way. Firstly, we outline our theoretical approach, highlighting the importance and originality of analysing the ontological assumptions of public policy and political discourse. Secondly, we review the existing literature on Conservative modernisation and in so doing highlight the centrality of the notion of the 'Big Society' and the 'social justice agenda'. We then examine the ontological basis of each of these elements in turn and establish the contradictions therein. Finally, we conclude that the Conservative modernisation project was an ontological failure, both in terms of problematic incoherencies in its underlying ontological assumptions and in terms of its failure to achieve any significant or lasting ideological change. It is acknowledged, indeed it is asserted, that the ontological controversies addressed in this article are problematic not just for Cameron's conservatism but for any political ideology. However, in the attempt to integrate disparate ideological strands, and in the failure to address the resultant tensions, Cameron's modernisation project was particularly susceptible to ontological contradictions. An analogy could be made to financial resources; every party must work within a budget, but the financial conditions parties face vary, as does their capacity to manage them. Similarly, there is variation in the extent to which ideological projects face ontological tensions, and variable capacities of actors to resolve or mitigate those tensions. In this article it is ultimately argued that the failure to achieve ontological coherence was *at least partly* responsible for the failure to achieve ideological change.

Theory

A political ideology can be said to contain three main types of assumption: normative, epistemological, and ontological. Normative assumptions are assumptions about *what should be*, what is right and wrong, how we should organise society and what kinds of social change we should seek to enact; they tend to be the focus of ideological analysis, political theory, and political philosophy. Epistemological assumptions are assumptions about what

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and how it is possible for us to know; they manifest themselves in political ideologies primarily in relation to the question of certainty. For example, Marxism, at least in its traditional scientific form, holds a great deal more certainty about its own premises than conservatism, at least in the latter's sceptical British idealist form. Finally, we come to ontological assumptions, which are assumptions about the fundamental nature and constitution of reality; they furnish ideologies with a basic set of concepts that implicitly and explicitly refer to the features, phenomena, and mechanisms of social reality. For example, Marxists might assume that society is fundamentally comprised of 'classes', 'means of production', 'superstructure' etc., whereas conservatives assume society is comprised of 'nations', 'traditions', 'duties' etc. Although the language and use of words is important here, the *ontological assumptions* are assumptions about what these words represent. Is 'class' just a way that Marxists understand inequality, or do Marxists assert that 'classes' are real entities with their own discrete existence and causal powers? In order to clearly outline the aims and scope of this article, it is necessary to consider ontology in more detail.

For years, if not decades, it has been recognised within the field of political analysis that *ontological assumptions matter* (Hay 2002, 2006; Marsh et al 2018). Stanley (2012: 95) explains that 'ontology in political science concerns the implicit and simplifying assumptions about political 'reality' that underpin explanations of political phenomena'. As Hay (2006: 462) puts it, one's ontological position is one's answer to the question: 'what is the nature of the social and political reality to be investigated?' Because ontological assumptions effectively define the nature of the subject matter, they can be considered a fundamental constituent of even the most basic knowledge we have about politics and society, so that 'no political analysis has ever been ontologically neutral' (Hay 2006: 460). Therefore, assumptions that a researcher makes about the nature of social and political existence (ontological assumptions) are generally acknowledged to influence each stage of the research process, from the posing of a research question through to the interpretation of findings. Beyond their fundamental position at the very foundations of knowledge, the importance of ontological assumptions can be further underlined by their inherently contested nature (Hay 2006). There are some ontological questions that are answered with almost unanimous consensus, but there are others that are deeply and irreconcilably contested.

When asking 'what is the nature of the social and political reality to be investigated?', the most basic and, in many ways, the most controversial issue that arises is the relation between the 'subject' and the 'object'. The subject could be the experiencer (you), it could be an experiencer in the abstract (a person), or in the collective (people). The object could be material (a physical entity), it could be living (a body), it could be social (an institution). A tangle of philosophical controversies revolve around the subject-object question, and it can thus be thought of as the central problem for social ontology. Even those who reject the distinction between subject and object, or reject the debate as an unhelpful language game, must acknowledge the range of contested positions and that theirs is one among them. Unfortunately, there are practical challenges to asking such abstract questions of a political project, especially when the formation of the question is so complicated and controversial. Therefore, in preparing the methodology for analysing ontological assumptions in political discourse and public policy, it is necessary to seek a clearer lens through which the analysis could be conducted. This lens consists of three main ontological controversies, each of which represents a knot pulled from the broader tangle of the subject-object controversy.

(1) The structure-agency debate (see Hay 2002 and McAnulla 2002). This debate relates to (i) the existence of freewill in various respects, including the freedom of the individual to think, act, and make change, and it relates to (ii) the existence of various forms of social structures and the powers those structures have to constrain, enable, and condition individuals. The question also concerns the extent to which structure and agency are indistinguishable features of social phenomena or distinct social entities.

(2) The material-cultural debate (see Hay and Gofas 2010, and Newman 2019a). This debate relates to (i) the existence of underlying material conditions, potentially including the natural world, human-made technology and the distribution of resources, and it relates to (ii) the existence of ideational and cultural phenomena, potentially including languages, thoughts, beliefs, discourses, ideologies, art and literature. The key controversies again revolve around the distinction between the two, and the extent to which social change is driven by one rather than the other.

(3) Archer and Tritter (2000), Hay (2002), and Marsh (2010) all identify these first two questions as foundational issues in the study of politics and society, alongside a more elusive third issue: social change. One way of conceiving of social change is as the product of structural and/or agential factors, and the product of material and/or cultural factors. Although this conceptualisation removes a number of more complicated questions about the nature of time and the stability-change relationship, it will suffice as a lens through which the ontological assumptions of Conservative Party modernisation can be studied.

These three controversies – structure-agency, material-cultural, and social change – therefore provide an analytical lens through which ontological questions can be explored. In other words, by explicating the implicit positioning of a political ideology within these three controversies, it is possible to identify that ideology's key commitments about the nature of social reality.

This approach is justified through its application in the course of the analysis, but it is worth beginning with a few more abstract justifications (for a fuller elucidation and justification of this approach, see Newman, 2019b). Firstly, each of us holds ontological assumptions – any political actor will necessarily hold assumptions about the extent of their own agency within any given political context, and will hold assumptions about the entities and processes that comprise that context. Secondly, policy makers inevitably engage with ontological controversies in the formation of any particular policy project. For example, a policy maker working on a project to tackle unemployment will unavoidably make assumptions about the extent to which the unemployed are influenced by material economic factors and the extent to which they are influenced by ideational cultural factors. Thirdly, political actors often make decisions on the basis of social research, especially when forming party manifesto pledges in opposition, or when forming government policy in office. It has already been noted that ontological assumptions are widely accepted to play a significant role in social research. Therefore, if ontological assumptions matter in social research, and if social research matters in political practice, then ontological assumptions matter in political practice.

In summary, this article seeks to analyse the ontological assumptions underpinning Conservative Party modernisation, focussing specifically on the assumptions made about

the relative causal significance of structural, agential, cultural, and material factors in the process of social change. The analysis does not attempt to identify the *beliefs* of particular politicians and policymakers, but instead focuses on the broader assumptions underpinning the Cameron-led modernisation of the Conservative Party. It is to specifics of that modernisation project that we must now turn.

Conservative Modernisation

The notion of party modernisation is, as Dommett (2015: 250) notes, both 'a highly familiar and yet ambiguous process'. Although (or perhaps because) exemplars of modernisation in British politics are widely recognised – most notably the Labour Party in the 1990s and the Conservatives under David Cameron – the concept is often not clearly defined. In his analysis of the former, Alan Finlayson (2003) suggests that modernisation encapsulated the transformation into New Labour in response to changing political and social circumstances, and the governing project that followed. Following Dommett, here we characterise modernisation as a process of party change underpinned by a critique of a party's policies, ideology, organisation and/or personnel as discordant with modern society, and therefore in need of updating and reform. It is therefore 'a distinct form of party change due to the emphasis it places on modern conditions' (2015: 251).

In their seminal theory of party change, Harmel and Janda (1994: 265-7) identified three key drivers of party change: external shock (primarily electoral defeat/loss of office); leadership change; and displacement of a dominant faction or factions by others. According to their theory, 'the most dramatic and broadest changes will occur only when the party has experienced an external shock' (1994: 265), without which a change of leader (whether or not also linked to a change in dominant faction) is unlikely to affect significant party change. The Conservative Party suffered a huge external shock at the 1997 general election, when Tony Blair's landslide victory swept Labour into office with a majority of 179 seats. The 2001 general election provided another seismic shock - not in that the Conservatives failed to regain power, as few had expected to overturn such an enormous defeat at the first attempt, but in that they failed to make any discernible progress towards doing so, gaining just one seat. Both of those defeats prompted changes of leadership, with William Hague assuming

the role in 1997, and Iain Duncan Smith succeeding him in 2001. Although Hague instituted organisational reforms, and Duncan Smith made some attempts to initiate a policy renewal process, their efforts came nowhere near to addressing the scale of the challenge the Conservatives faced (Bale, 2010). The third defeat that followed in 2005 at last seemed to persuade at least a substantial chunk of the Conservative Party that a more far-reaching form of party change was required.

As noted in the introduction, the agenda for Conservative modernisation that David Cameron laid out in his bid for the party leadership emphasised the need for a shift in Conservative values to move them closer to the median voter. This diagnosis rested on a reading of contemporary society that discerned the need to find an accommodation with a long-term shift in social attitudes, rather than simply seeking a short-term tactical advantage over Labour on particular issues where the governing party was seen to be unpopular or lacking credible policies. While the Conservatives took the emergence of Tony Blair's modernised New Labour as evidence that they had achieved (in Cameron's words) 'victory in the battle of ideas' on economic questions, the same could not be said about social issues, where the centre of gravity appeared to be moving in a more socially liberal direction, away from the rather more traditionalist Conservative Party. As one leading moderniser, Francis Maude (2013: 144) observed: 'The centre of gravity of social attitudes has moved significantly towards much greater tolerance and respect. The Conservative Party doesn't have to run ahead of society – but it can't lag too far behind either'.

Cameron and his fellow modernisers were therefore armed with an account of social change that buttressed their political programme, and which reinforced their claim that the Conservatives must 'change to win'. This represented a decisive break with the situation under Hague and Duncan Smith, whose 'failure to change and modernise was partly due to the lack of evidence that change would improve the position of the party in the polls (given the governing success of New Labour), but it was also due to the fact that neither leader was truly convinced of their own new narrative' (Heppell, 2014: 133). The same could not be said of 'Team Cameron' who were 'intellectually but also emotionally committed' to implementing their strategy (Bale, 2010: 284).

The centrepiece of the modernisers' blueprint was social liberalism, linked to an embrace of 'social justice' (Hayton and McEnhill, 2015). On one level, this was about catch-up with the

process of value-change modernisers identified in contemporary society, as discussed above. On another, it was about signalling a departure from the ideological legacy of Thatcherism. And at a tactical level it was the linchpin of a range of policy shifts and changes in political messaging. As Bale (2010: 284) explains, 'Cameron would begin by doing everything in his power to communicate to the electorate that the Party was changing and, every bit as importantly, was moving back into the centre ground.' This involved downplaying matters such as Europe, taxation and immigration, and instead focusing on issues such as 'the environment; feminisation; international aid; the NHS; and poverty and social justice' (Heppell, 2013: 341). Cameron was memorably photographed with a husky in the Arctic on a trip designed to highlight the priority he would give to tackling climate change as part of his aim to lead the 'greenest government ever'; and he pledged that a third of his ministers would be women. Perhaps most controversially of all within the Conservative Party was Cameron's championing of gay rights, particularly equal marriage for same-sex couples, which became the touchstone question in the dispute between social liberals and social traditionalists under the Coalition government.

Modernisation of party policy might therefore be seen as logically derived from (and therefore taken as an indicator of) ideological change, operating through a 'funnel effect' from the macro 'normative framework', through a 'meso-level, entailing general statements of principle', and finally to 'the micro-level, entailing concrete proposals for specific policies' (Dorey, 2007: 142). However, for Dommett (2015: 254), 'it is possible for a party to modernise its organisational structures or its branding without changing its ideology as long as the change pursued is motivated by modern conditions'. Strikingly, even against the seemingly more achievable criteria set by Dommett, in retrospect Conservative modernisation has largely been judged a failure, even after a seemingly promising start in the first two years of his leadership (Kerr and Hayton, 2015). Central to these assessments is the claim that Cameron's programme lacked ideological depth and coherence, and was thus easily blown off course by events such as the global financial crisis (ibid). For example, Dommett (2015: 263) argues that 'Cameron articulated a vision of micro and meso level change that adapted Conservative policies, principles and party procedures to reflect modern attitudes' but that this 'was not underpinned by a new ideological agenda that was capable of embedding change'. Hayton (2012; 2016) has similarly argued that contemporary

conservatism remains fundamentally circumscribed by the legacy of Thatcherism, and that the modernisation failed to move it beyond these parameters in key respects.

Given these criticisms, here we seek to examine the two central elements of Cameronite conservatism that sought to breach the limits of the Thatcherite ideological inheritance. Firstly we discuss the 'Big Society', which sought to triangulate between Thatcherite individualism and state-centred approaches to politics, therefore bringing notions of collective responsibility and actions more to the fore in Conservative politics. Secondly we examine the 'social justice agenda', the party's approach to poverty and unemployment, which similarly appeared to break with the Thatcherite rejection of the notions of social justice and relative poverty. Together, these two policy projects represent the two most prominent and sustained elements of the modernisation project, while also representing the core of Cameronite social policy, with the Big Society entailing the approach to public service delivery and the social justice agenda entailing the approach to poverty and welfare.

The Big Society

The Big Society was David Cameron's big idea and the flagship of the 2010 Conservative manifesto. As the newly installed Prime Minister, Cameron declared that his 'great passion' was the delivery of the Big Society (Cameron, 2010). It was first articulated as a soundbite by Cameron in 2009, but the intellectual roots can be traced to a debate in Conservative circles over the meaning and purpose of conservatism post-Thatcher, in particular the sense that by emphasising free markets the party had neglected the importance of community and values (Hayton, 2012: 31-39). Contributions from the likes of Oliver Letwin (2003) and David Willetts (2005), both of whom went on to be notable figures in the Coalition government, influenced Cameron's determined effort to distance himself from Thatcherism during his campaign for the Conservative leadership in 2005, encapsulated in his assertion that 'There is such a thing as society. It's not the same thing as the state' (Cameron, 2005b). The belief that the Conservative Party needed to emulate New Labour's strategy of 'triangulation' to relocate towards the political centre ground, 'defining itself against the caricatures of Thatcherism and state centralism' thus became a core element of Cameronite modernisation (McAnulla, 2010: 311). The Big Society not only promised to bridge the gap between market fundamentalism and big government, but also to bridge the gap between two seemingly irreconcilable policy commitments: from the 2008 financial crash onwards,

the Conservative Party increasingly emphasised the need to reduce the national deficit, whilst also retaining a commitment to maintaining public services. The 2010 Conservative Manifesto consequently promised 'the same quality of public services for £60 billion less each year' (Conservative Party, 2010: 27), with the Big Society the key to squaring this circle by facilitating a reduction in the size of the state (Smith, 2010).

The Big Society was therefore the centrepiece of Conservative modernisation. Simultaneously it was Cameron's 'big idea', an approach to the legacy of Thatcherism, a discursive electoral strategy, and purportedly a way of delivering low-cost, high-quality public services. Cameron's pitch for the centre ground via a triangulation of New Labour and Thatcherism effectively rested upon the multifaceted Big Society. However, the move towards a 'centrist position', whether a position in discourse, ideology or policy, is a difficult ideational challenge that relies not just on negotiating the political and economic contexts but also on a successful negotiation of the structured nature of ideas. In other words, synthesising ideological and policy positions requires theoretical work, especially if those positions have historically been developed as opposites. It is clear that the development of the Big Society had entailed theoretical work, such as the 'red Toryism' of Phillip Blond (2010), the electoral strategy of Steve Hilton (Bale, 2008), and the earlier legwork of Duncan Smith, Letwin, and Willetts (Hickson, 2009). However, whether the Big Society successfully synthesised its initially disparate constituent ideas is another question. To critics, it was little more than rhetorical cover for the austerity agenda (Kisby, 2010). In the remainder of this section, the ideological coherence of the Big Society will be considered specifically in terms of its ontological assumptions.

Throughout its development and implementation, the Big Society was juxtaposed with 'Big Government' (Conservative Party, 2010), which was identified as aggravating societal ills. As the Conservative leader put it in 2009:

> [T]he size, scope and role of government in Britain has reached a point where it is now inhibiting, not advancing the progressive aims of reducing poverty, fighting inequality, and increasing general well-being. Indeed there is a worrying paradox that because of its effect on personal and social responsibility, the recent growth of the

state has promoted not social solidarity, but selfishness and individualism. (Cameron, 2009).

However, crucially for proponents of the Big Society, a Thatcherite rolling back of the frontiers of the state is not sufficient to enable it to flourish. While critiquing big government for atomising society, Cameron argued that 'it doesn't follow that smaller government would automatically bring us together again' (Cameron, 2009). By critiquing both 'big government' and 'small government' for creating selfishness, individualisation, and a frayed social fabric (Conservative Party, 2010), there are clear normative assumptions being made about value of community and social structure. The *ontological* assumptions are less obvious, but one in particular is notable here: by suggesting that the growth of the state has led to selfishness and individualism, there is an assertion that social structure has the power to make people more/less responsible and more/less selfish. This assumption tends to be associated with socialist perspectives, which see the remaking of the social structure to be a key step in the creation of agency, empowerment and positive freedom, as well as solidarity, altruism, and generosity. However, although the focus on *designing social structures* to create a better society tends to be associated with the left, it is at a basic level also a neoliberal position, in the sense that a better society can be created by solidifying the rules of the market, expanding those rules to more areas of life, and removing regulations that limit marketisation. As such, at an ontological level, the Big Society shares assumptions with the radicalism of socialism and neoliberalism, rather than the conservative reverence of existing social structures and pessimistic view of human nature and our capacity to alter it.

If we look beyond the Big Society's negative foundation of *not* big government and *not* small government, towards its positive solution, we can begin to see exactly how the social structure is to be radically remade. As the instigator of the Big Society project, the state has to be utilised to foster responsibility. This is spelled out in the 2010 manifesto:

> Our alternative to big government is the Big Society: a society with much higher levels of personal, professional, civic and corporate responsibility; a society where people come together to solve problems and improve life for themselves and their communities; a society where the leading force for progress is social responsibility, not state control. (2010: 37).

> [The Big Society] is a change from one political philosophy to another. From the idea that the role of the state is to direct society and micro-manage public services, to the idea that the role of the state is to strengthen society and make public services serve the people who use them. In a simple phrase, the change we offer is from big government to Big Society. (2010: vii).

Consequently, 'building the Big Society … will require an active role for the state' (Conservative Party, 2010: 37). Much as Thatcherism saw the need for a strong state to 'free' the economy (Gamble, 1988), Cameronism suggested an activist state was required to 'remake society' and 'galvanise social renewal' (Conservative Party, 2010: 37). In stressing this role for the state, and in the explicit distancing from Thatcherism, the rhetoric of the Big Society fits neatly into the framework of Conservative modernisation outlined in the previous section. At an ontological level, it is possible to identify some coherence in this approach. The organic fabric of society has been damaged by the intervening actions of state planners, and to a lesser extent by a history of state neglect; repairing this fabric requires the state to be an instigator of community action. We can consider this position in the terms of the structure-agency debate: there is a social structure made up of the state, the market, and civil society; the agents within the state have the responsibility to transfer powers away from the state, prioritising civil society over the market as the beneficiary; individuals then have the responsibility to take on these powers and in so doing to repair the social fabric; as a result of the repaired social fabric, individuals will become more responsible and more community-spirited; this creates a virtuous circle driven by the interaction between structure and agents. However, there are tensions here that point towards underlying ontological contradictions.

The contradictions inherent in the Big Society begin to crystallise when we ask which causal force(s) will make the Big Society happen? Consistent with Thatcherism (and indeed the emphasis placed on social liberalism by the modernisers), the Big Society philosophy rests on the agency of individuals in society acting freely in a responsible, moral, and socially beneficial fashion; for example giving generously to charity or contributing their time to charities or third sector organisations to help deliver public services. Furthermore, the success of the Big Society does not just depend on people *behaving* responsibly, it also

requires that this behaviour is the product of the 'independence, enthusiasm, commitment, innovation and diversity' of civil society rather than the outcome of state direction (SJPG, 2006). Therefore, the causal force on which the Big Society depends is not socialist state-planning nor the neoliberal profit motive, but the morally responsible actions of individual agents. This creates a problem for policy makers, because where state planning and the profit motive can be brought about through existing policy mechanisms, it is unclear how ministers go about ensuring that the population freely fulfil their moral responsibilities. The progress of the Big Society is therefore restricted due to the contradiction between its underlying agentialist ontology and its need to be implemented as a radical government policy programme. Effectively, the government have limited options beyond pleas for people to take responsibility:

> How will we raise responsible children unless every adult plays their part? How will we revitalise communities unless people stop asking 'who will fix this?' and start asking 'what can I do?' Britain will change for the better when we all elect to take part, to take responsibility – if we all come together. Collective strength will overpower our problems. (Conservative Party, 2010: iii)

One answer to this contradiction comes from Thaler and Sustein's (2009) "nudge theory", which 'has been eulogised by David Cameron's Conservatives and widely taken up in policy circles' (Leggett, 2014: 3). As well as bringing in Richard Thaler as an unpaid advisor, Cameron established the Behavioural Insights Team, which became known as the 'nudge unit' (Leggett, 2014: 4). Nudge theory insists that 'people should be free to choose', while simultaneously accepting that individual agents 'are strongly influenced by details of the context in which they make their choice' (Sustein and Thaler, 2003: 1161). On this basis, it claims to be able to change behaviour through various modifications to the social context, without limiting people's freedom of choice (Thaler and Sustein, 2009). Therefore, nudge theory seemed to fix the problem of how to institute the Big Society. However, this depends on its success in solving the related ontological contradiction between a change produced by the responsible agents of civil society and a change produced by the state-led reorganisation of social structures.

While there is not the space here to engage fully with the theoretical underpinnings of nudge theory, the approach can be said to disguise its own ontological contradiction in the

ambiguity of the phrase "free to choose". On the one hand it accepts that agency, and therefore individual freedom, is only ever partial due to the subconscious constraints of the social context, on the other hand it embraces a liberal discourse within which the free individual agent is the basic building block of society. Therefore, rather than being a solution to the ontological contradiction of the big society, nudge theory can instead be seen as a more sophisticated mobilisation of the same fundamental problem.

Moving from the structure-agency question to the material-ideational question, the big society's reliance on the moral duty of individuals can be labelled 'ontologically idealist'. If people are acting according to a 'duty', they are motivated by an idea, rather than, for example, financial gain. At a fundamental level, the Big Society therefore rejects a narrowly rationalist and materialist view of human nature as *homo economicus* (Norman, 2010: 10). Just as with agentialism, this idealist position again creates a problem for policy makers, because it means that in order to bring about the Big Society, they must engage in policies that change the way people think. An example of such a policy was proposed during the 2006/7 Conservative Party policy review: 'through [a] one-off initiative to help instil habits of charitable giving, all Year 6 pupils in England would be issued with a £5 giving voucher each term' (SJPG, 2007 v6: 8). A more developed attempt to meet this same policy goal was the 'National Citizens Service', which Bulley and Sokhi-Bulley (2014) identify as an attempt to discipline and regulate the behaviour of its participants in order to produce socially responsible citizens. This points again to the tension between the government engineering of behaviour and the value of freely made decisions, between an attempt to instil particular patterns of behaviours from a young age, and a reliance on a pre-existing neighbourly spirit and the organic institutions of community. However, with the specific example of the National Citizens Service, questions must be raised about Bulley and Sokhi-Bulley's expectations of the power of the policy and understatement of the agency of the individual participants (Byrne, Kerr, and Foster 2014). Indeed, while the National Citizens Service can be considered a success on a range of measures, if it was indeed an attempt to fundamentally transform the citizenry into a fabric of self-sufficient and altruistic communities, it has clearly failed.

National Citizens Service aside, the Conservative proposals to increase 'philanthropy' were, for the most part based on financial incentives. They primarily sought to lever the effectiveness and influence of existing institutions by creating more favourable economic conditions for their activities and fundraising. For example, the Social Justice Policy Group focused on 'tax-efficient vehicles' for large donations and 'corporate social bonds to encourage private sector investment' (SJPG 2007 v6: 8). This return to financial incentives, and therefore to the rational materialist ontology of neoliberalism, creates a contradiction between (a) the cultural-centred vision of individuals fulfilling their moral duty in the 'little platoons' of civil society and (b) the material-centred attempt to bring this vision about through incentivisation. At a practical policy level, this may seem a complementarity, but (a) and (b) are based on fundamentally different visions of human nature and social causality.

We can conclude this section by suggesting that the Big Society entails at least three ontological contradictions. On the one hand it is a socialist-style project in the sense that it aims to *create* agency, responsibility and altruism through a government-led policy programme, but on the other it rests on the assumption that the project is only possible if people freely elect to use their agency, responsibility and altruism to bring the Big Society about through the little platoons of civil society. In simpler terms, the project is caught between its philosophical view that the Big Society can only happen spontaneously, and the practical necessity that the state is going to have to bring the Big Society about. The second tension arises as result of a similar problem. On the one hand, the Big Society relies on a philosophical idealist vision of human action, whereby people act, or are at least capable of acting, according to a sense of community spirit and moral responsibility, but on the other the vast majority of Big Society policy proposals involve incentivisation based on the materialist assumption that humans act for financial gain. Therefore, the Big Society builds from an agentialist and idealist ontology but is forced towards structuralist and materialist assumptions in its implementation. This brings us ultimately to the vision of 'social change' that lies at the heart of the Big Society, and to the third contradiction. On the one hand, social change is an evolutionary process that needs to happen 'organically' and therefore requires the absence of big government, but on the other hand, social change requires the government to bring about particular behaviours based on a particular civil-society-based notion of human agency, which in turn rests on particular normative assumptions about what is the 'morally responsible' course of action. These three tensions show both the ontological

incoherence of the Big Society, and the extent to which this incoherence severely limited its implementation.

The Social Justice Agenda

What is here referred to as the social justice agenda (henceforth SJA) was a policy project led by Iain Duncan Smith and directed towards the modernisation of the Conservative Party position on poverty, unemployment, and welfare. It built on ideas Duncan Smith began to develop during his own tenure as Conservative leader and afterwards via the think-tank the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) which he established in 2004. Cameron asked Duncan Smith to chair his Social Justice Policy Group (SJPG) and it ran directly through the CSJ's organisational structures. This policy review then formed the foundation of the Coalition's social policy, as Duncan Smith became Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in 2010 and remained so until 2016. In 2012, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) laid out its approach to poverty in a document entitled *Social Justice: Transforming Lives* (DWP 2012a). The 2012 Welfare Reform Act and Universal Credit were both products of the SJA, marking its significance for public policy as well as political discourse.

The development of this strand of public policy has received a great deal of attention in the social policy literature. For Bochel and Powell (2016), the SJA was a Conservative Party endeavour, even during the Coalition government, and was characterised by the aims of simplifying benefits, increasing conditionality, and reducing costs. They also argue that the latter aim, driven by the austerity agenda, undermined the broader discourse of 'compassionate conservatism' that was used to communicate the SJA (Bochel and Powell, 2016). Even if the austerity agenda placed certain limitations on Conservative social policy, it did not dictate its underlying assumptions. Morris (2019: 287) argues that the SJA was 'justified by notions of dependency as a behavioural choice', emphasising its focus on the individual agent. Millar and Bennett (2017) note that this focus on the individual agent was ultimately contradicted by the increased control in the Universal Credit design. Wiggan (2012) uncovers similar themes in his analysis of SJA documents, identifying a concern with the poor choices of agents, a concern with the culture of dependency, and an overriding concern with financial incentives. Dobson (2015) emphasises the need for an ontological

unpicking of these various assumptions, and Whitworth (2016) offers one such analysis, identifying a contradiction between different ontological conceptions of the agent in the SJA. This section builds on this literature by specifying these ontological contradictions in relation to the structure-agency issue and material-ideational issue.

To investigate the underlying ontological assumptions of the SJA, a range of policy documents were analysed from the Conservative Party, the SJPG and the DWP. From this analysis of SJA documents, three distinct strands of ontological assumptions were identified. The first can be labelled the 'life-course model', a name derived from the policy documents themselves, which all state that their central strategy 'follows a life-cycle structure' (DWP, 2012a: 13). The second can be labelled the 'rationalist model', not because the documents themselves refer to 'rationality', but because there are key sections and policies that are fundamentally based on a rationalist understanding of the individual. The third main strand can be labelled the 'responsibility model', because, following the centrality of 'responsibility' to the Conservative modernisation period (Atkins, 2015), there was a continued return to the importance of individual responsibility for welfare provision. Although it may be possible to further divide each of these three strands or perhaps to detect other more minor ones, all of the major causal factors and policy solutions identified by the SJA texts rely clearly on one of these three strands of ontological assumptions.

Extract 1 (below) shows that the basis of the approach to poverty in the SJA was a life-course model. On the structure-agency issue, this life-course model entails the assumption that individuals are socialised through the institutions of their life-course, which emphasises the causal power of structured institutions, notably the family (see Extract 2), but also the education and welfare systems. Extracts 3 and 4 emphasise just how deep this socialising influence of structures is assumed to go. On the material-cultural issue, the life-course model prioritises cultural factors, including 'values' and 'attitudes' (see Extract 5). This leads to a focus on how the culture and values of 'worklessness' are passed from parent to child (see Extract 6). During the 2006-7 policy review, the Conservative Party also considered material factors in the life-course model, such as when 'intergenerational worklessness' occurs because 'children have no quiet place to do their homework' or no 'food to feed their minds' (SJPG, 2006: 55). However, from 2008 onwards, there is no reference to material mechanisms of intergenerational worklessness, and the focus remains on the passing of *values* and *attitudes* from one generation to the next. Therefore, in the life-course model,

there is a prioritisation of structure over agency, with individuals assumed to be the product of the institutions of their life-course, and a prioritisation of the cultural over the material, with those institutions exerting their causal power through the intergenerational transmission of values and attitudes.

> **Extract 1:** 'supporting the most disadvantaged individuals... starts with support for the most important building block in a child's life – the family – but also covers reform of the school and youth justice systems, the welfare system, and beyond to look at how we can prevent damaging behaviours like substance abuse and offending.' (DWP 2012a: 1).

> **Extract 2:** 'Family structure and family process matter - making a commitment can make a significant difference to behaviours and attitudes' (SJPG, 2007: 4).

> **Extract 3:** 'It is unacceptable that young people should have their future life chances determined by their upbringing' (DWP, 2012a: 28).

> **Extract 4:** 'it will take many years to see the impact of our reforms work their way through, as today's children reach adulthood' (DWP, 2012a: 35).

> **Extract 5:** 'In the end, welfare reform is less a question of rules and regulations, systems and procedures; it is more a question of culture and values' (Conservative Party, 2008: 9).

> **Extract 6:** 'Children growing up in workless households are more likely to experience worklessness themselves' (DWP, 2012a: 37).

However, a major problem with a cultural life-course model was that it failed to offer policy makers obvious levers of change. If poverty is the product of the intergenerational transmission of culture through the structure of life-course institutions, it would seem that poverty is a continuous cycle that can only be broken with sustained and deep-level socialisation of children. Therefore, although the life-course model led the Conservatives

towards a focus on the family, the education system, and on the reforming of individuals' characters, the actual policy solutions of the SJA relied on rather different ontological assumptions. One notable example is the Work Programme, a policy programme inherited from New Labour, but taken forward towards the specified aim of giving 'unemployed people the skills, training and experience they need to get a job' (DWP, 2012b: 2) and to 'change the way people think about work and its wider benefits' (DWP, 2012a: 38). Through its strategies of personalised support and long-term contact, the Work Programme can be seen as an attempt to intervene in the problematic life-course socialisation and worklessness culture. However, the actual delivery of the Work Programme is through a payment-by-results model that requires nothing particular of Work Programme providers beyond increases in employment rates. Therefore, the complex life-course explanation of poverty, along with its associated assumptions and policy aims was abandoned in favour of a rationalist model that sought to solve poverty through a market-style profit motive.

The Work Programme is an archetypal example of the ontological shift from a life-course model, in which people are assumed to behave according to the cultural socialisation of their childhood, to a rationalist model, in which people are assumed to behave according to material incentives. Despite the repeated reference to 'choice', as in Extract 8, the rationalist model ascribes relatively little agency to individuals, because the causal factor driving behavioural change is not individual agency or moral responsibility, but is instead the structure of incentives frameworks, and specifically the structure of the benefits system (see Extract 9). This materialist-structuralist emphasis of the rationalist model is clearly stated in Extract 10, where it is assumed that slight changes to hourly income implemented through the Universal Credit system will lead to mass behavioural change. Universal Credit demonstrates the fundamental contradiction between an ontology based on a culturally produced individual and an ontology based on a material-maximising individual: if the slight changes to hourly pay introduced by Universal Credit are capable of transforming the behaviour of most (if not all) benefit claimants (Extract 10), it would seem that their lifetime of cultural socialisation has very little hold or significant influence on their actual behaviour or ways of thinking.

> **Extract 8:** '…allowing people to keep more of their money as they move into work, will make legitimate work a rational choice for recipients.' (DWP, 2010b: 42)

> **Extract 9:** 'The structure and administration of the benefits system act as barriers for many people to obtain or sustain work. There are still too many benefit traps...' (SJPG 2007, v2: 79)

> **Extract 10:** 'By improving the incentives to work, and to work more, the business case estimates that there will be up to an additional 300,000 households in work, once the impact of Universal Credit is fully realised.' (DWP, 2014: 31)

Therefore, with the life-course model and the rationalist model emphasising the causal power of cultural structures and material structures respectively, the ontological contradiction between them largely revolves around differing positions on the material-cultural issue. Although the two entail very different assumptions about the nature of structural power, neither allocates a causally significant role to human agency. Instead, a third distinct strand of assumptions exists that allocates a dominant, even determining, role to the moral and causal responsibility of the individual agent: the responsibility model. From Cameron's very first statement of his party's values (Conservative Party, 2006) through to the implementation and evaluation of Universal Credit (DWP, 2015), there is an inconsistent but continual return to the belief that individual actions are largely determined by individual agency. Unsurprisingly, this assumption generates a great deal of tension with the other two ontological models.

As shown in Extract 11, there is an attempt to integrate the responsibility model and the life-course model, on the basis that giving people more choices will counteract their negative life-course socialisation. However, as well as there being a theoretical mismatch between the importance of socialisation in the life-course model and its limited significance in the responsibility model, there is also a resultant policy contradiction. The Coalition policy to pay claimants monthly and their policy to end direct-to-landlord benefit payments both fail to make a distinction between the creation of agency in claimants (life-course model) and the freeing of agents to use their agency (responsibility model). The former motivates and justifies the policy on the assumption that claimants need agency, while the latter underpins the functioning of the policy, on the assumption that claimants already have agency.

Therefore, the ontological contradiction between the responsibility model and the life-course model not only creates theoretical tensions but also tensions within implemented policies.

Extract 11: 'Enabling people to make choices and exercise control over the support they receive can develop their sense of responsibility and independence' (DWP, 2012a: 64).

Extract 12: 'The Government will do everything it can to make sure that taking a job is the logical choice, but we expect the individual to make that choice.' (DWP, 2013: 39)

Extract 13: 'The recently established Claimant Communications Unit is reviewing the sanctions communications and providing expert advice and behavioural insight to ensure they are understood by claimants and drive the appropriate behaviours.' (DWP, 2014: 11)

Extract 14: 'Individuals who are able to look for work or prepare for work should be required to do so as a condition for receiving benefit and those who fail to meet their responsibilities should face a sanction such as a benefit reduction. This is known as conditionality.' (DWP, 2010a: 28)

In Extract 12, an attempt is made to integrate the responsibility model and the rationalist model, on the basis that individuals have a moral responsibility to choose rationally. However, this solution clearly fails to overcome the contradiction, because either individuals act rationally and therefore Universal Credit will bring about mass behavioural change (as in Extract 10), or individuals act according to their moral responsibility, in which case the success of Universal Credit fundamentally relies on the claimants fulfilling their responsibilities and does not in itself lead to mass behavioural change. Although there may be ways in which these two positions fit together, or ways in which a middle ground can be sought, the SJA texts are marked by a fluctuation between the two extremes. This fluctuation is most notable in the contradictory justifications for extending benefit conditionality and increasing the use of benefit sanctions. In some instances (see Extract 13), conditionality is justified on the basis of incentives that drive individual behaviour, which ontologically allocates causal dominance to material structures. In other instances (see Extract 14),

conditionality is justified on the basis of rewards and punishments for the morally ir/responsible behaviour of individuals; in these instances, causal dominance is allocated to individual agency.

In summary, this section has shown that the SJA policy project contains three contradictory strands of ontological assumptions: firstly, there is a life-course model that underpins an explanation of poverty as the product of cultural socialisation through the institutional structures of the life course; secondly, there is a rationalist model that underpins an explanation of poverty as the product of perverse incentives in the benefit system and wider society; thirdly, there is a responsibility model that underpins an explanation of poverty as the product of individual failures to take morally responsible courses of action. The attempts to integrate these models are limited, in the sense that most of the analysed policy documents fluctuate between extremes rather than exploring integrations and overlaps. Where integrations are attempted, and where overlaps inevitably arise, problematic policy positions are produced, including but not limited to a contradictory justification of conditionality, and a contradictory attempt to instil benefit claimants with individual agency. As a result, the SJA contributes to the ontological failure of Conservative modernisation in two ways: (i) the attempt to develop a new explanation of poverty based on cultural socialisation was ultimately abandoned in favour of more traditional neoliberal ontologies based on rationalism and individual responsibility; (ii) there is ontological incoherence between all three strands, which leads to incoherence within actual policy reforms.

Conclusion

Cameron's desire to modernise conservatism implied a process of ideological change and a shift away from Thatcherism towards the political centre ground. At the heart of this project was the Big Society, which attempted to find a third way between Thatcherism and state-centred approaches in the context of austerity. Alongside this, the SJA was a key element of Cameron's desire to demonstrate a move towards a more progressive, compassionate, modern conservatism which took questions of social justice seriously in a way that the more individualistic philosophy of Thatcherism did not. However, as this article has demonstrated, in relation to both the Big Society and the SJA, Cameronite conservatism struggled to

achieve ontological coherence, with striking contradictions identified in the party's thinking in both areas. While these contradictions do not in themselves explain the failure of Conservative modernisation, they must be considered as a key aspect in any wider explanation.

The Big Society contains at least three ontological contradictions: (1) between the assumption that society is made up of morally responsible agents and the assumption that the state must reorganise society so that people become morally responsible agents; (2) between the assumption that people act according to values and the assumption that people act according to financial incentives; (3) the assumption that social change is organically evolutionary and the assumption that social change will occur according to the government's radical programme of reform. Within the SJA, contradictions were seen to exist between three recurring ontological models: the life-course model, the rational model, and the responsibility model. Conservative and Coalition policy documents fluctuate between these models without any significant or successful attempted integration, which creates contradictions between each pairing. It is worth making three clarifying comments about ontological contradictions identified in this article: firstly, contradictory positions on the structure-agency and material-cultural issues are by no means unique to the Conservative Party and the Coalition government, but the specific nature of those contradictions is significant; secondly, those contradictions were particularly problematic for Cameron's 'modernisation' project due to attempts to forge ideological combinations; finally, the contradictions are not necessarily insurmountable, though overcoming them would require theoretical innovations or, more realistically, the abandonment of certain ontological positions.

This article has argued that ontological assumptions are real constituent elements of political discourse and public policy, which means their in/coherence can have consequences for political and social events. From a social policy perspective, the ontological contradictions identified here create problems for policy implementation, both in terms of a government's ability to convert their political discourse into practical policies, and in terms of the success of those policies once implemented. Ontological in/coherence also has wider political and ideological consequences. It has already been argued in the existing literature that Cameron's modernisation of the Conservative Party did not ultimately represent a substantial ideological shift away from Thatcherism, but this article has demonstrated the

limitations of the modernisation project through an analysis of its underlying ontological assumptions. Cameron sought to move the Conservatives away from Thatcherism by embracing new ideas as part of key policy programmes, such as the Big Society and SJA, but with those new ideas came new ontological assumptions, which created contradictions at the heart of the modernisation agenda. Although contradictions can often be ignored or disguised in political discourse and public policy, they undermine the communicative value of that discourse and undermine the practical effects of that policy. So, while at the macro-level the normative framework may appear to have changed dramatically through the enthusiastic adoption of notions such as social justice or the Big Society, this rhetorical shift may actually embed unresolvable ontological contradictions which fundamentally limit the extent to which modernisation can be coherently pursued at the meso- and micro-levels that Dorey (2007) identified. Dommett (2015) is therefore right to note that modernisation might not necessarily occur through a 'funnel effect' and at all levels, but ontological coherence is vital to ensure deep and meaningful modernisation at the macro-, meso- and micro-levels.

As well as contributing to existing scholarship on Conservative Party modernisation and the Big Society and SJA, this article has highlighted the importance and possibility of analysing the underlying ontological assumptions of political discourse and public policy. By focussing on three issues of ontological controversy, structure-agency, material-cultural, and social change, it is possible to uncover new knowledge about the content and causal significance of political ideas. This article has applied this approach to the Cameron-led 'modernisation' of the Conservative Party, but the potential for application is much wider and offers a fruitful avenue for future research into the nature and impact of ideas in politics and public policy.

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