In NLR 147 Jessop, Bonnett, Bromley and Ling contributed a long and important article ‘Authoritarian Populism, Two Nations and Thatcherism’. This article took issue with ‘authoritarian populism’ (hereinafter, alas, AP) and the use of that concept in my work on Thatcherism; and proposed some wide-ranging alternative theses. I should like myself to take issue with some aspects of their argument, not so much to defend my work as, through mutual discussion and debate, to advance our understanding of the phenomenon of Thatcherism.

My view, briefly, is that in their genuine desire to produce a general and definitive account of Thatcherism as a global phenomenon, Jessop et al have been led to mistake my own, more delimited project for their own, more ambitious one. In so doing, they obscure or misread many of my arguments. They produce, in the end, a rather confused tangle of important arguments and spurious debating points. Let me say categorically that ‘authoritarian
populism’ (AP) has never been intended to, could not possibly have been intended and—I would claim—has never been used in my work, to produce a general explanation of Thatcherism. It addresses, directly, the question of the forms of hegemonic politics. In doing so, it deliberately and self-consciously foregrounds the political-ideological dimension. Thatcherism, however, is a multi-faceted historical phenomenon, which it would be ludicrous to assume could be ‘explained’ along one dimension of analysis only. In that basic sense, I believe the Jessop et al critique to have been fundamentally misdirected. The misunderstanding begins, so far as I can see, with their partial and inadequate account of the genealogy of the concept.

AP first emerged, as they acknowledged, from the analysis of the political conjuncture, mid-1960s/mid 1970s, advanced by myself and others in Policing The Crisis. That analysis accurately forecast the rise of Thatcherism, though it was researched in the mid-70s and published in 1978. It pointed, inter alia, to a shift taking place in the ‘balance of social and political forces’ (or what Gramsci calls the ‘relations of force’), pinpointed in the disintegration of the social-democratic consensus under Callaghan and the rise of the radical right under Thatcherite auspices. It argued that the corporatist consensus—the form of politics in which Labour had attempted to stabilize the crisis—was breaking up under internal and external pressures. However, the balance in the relations of force was moving— in that ‘unstable equilibrium’ between coercion and consent which characterizes all democratic class politics—decisively towards the ‘authoritarian’ pole. We were approaching, it argued, a moment of ‘closure’ in which the state played an increasingly central ‘educative’ role. We noted, however, the degree to which this shift ‘from above’ was pioneered by, harnessed to, and to some extent legitimated by a populist groundswell below. The form of this populist enlistment—we suggested—in the 1960s and 1970s often took the shape of a sequence of ‘moral panics’, around such apparently non-political issues as race, law-and-order, permissiveness and social anarchy. These served to win for the authoritarian closure the gloss of populist consent.

Development of the Concept

The actual term ‘authoritarian populism’, however, only emerged in 1978 after I read the concluding section to Nicos Poulantzas’s courageous and original book, State, Power, Socialism, which was also—tragically—his last political statement. There, Poulantzas attempted to characterize a new ‘moment’ in the conjuncture of the class democracies, formed by ‘intensive state control over every sphere of socio-economic life, combined with radical decline of the institutions of political democracy and with draconian and multiform curtailment of so-called “formal” liberties, whose reality is being discovered now that they are going

1 Stuart Hall et al., Policing the Crisis, London 1978.
overboard'. (I especially relished that final phrase, since it put me in mind of how often the fundamentalist left is scornful of civil liberties until they find themselves badly in need of some.) More seriously, I thought I recognized in this account, and in my brief conversations with Poulantzas at the time, many similarities between his characterization and those I had been struggling to formulate in *Policing the Crisis*, ‘Drifting into a Law-and-Order Society’, and so on.

Poulantzas called this the moment of ‘authoritarian statism’ (AS). He added, *inter alia*, that it was linked with ‘the periodization of capitalism into distinct stages and phases’; that it existed ‘in the form of regimes that vary according to the conjuncture of the country concerned’; that it covered, specifically, *both* the political crisis and the crisis of the state; that it was intended to help us periodize ‘the relationship between the state and the political crisis’. He insisted it was *neither* the birth pangs of fascism nor an ‘exceptional form of the capitalist state’ nor even ‘the fulfilment of the totalitarian buds inherent in every capitalist state’. Indeed, the importance of AS was that it represented a new combination of coercion/consent, tilted towards the coercive end of the spectrum, while maintaining the outer forms of democratic class rule intact. It did, he argued, relate to ‘considerable shifts in class relations’ (not, devotees of *Class Politics* please note, to the so-called ‘disappearance of class or the class struggle’, whatever that entirely fictional construction of theirs might mean). But also, that it coincided with the generalization of class conflict and other social struggles to ‘new fronts’. It thus represented a fundamental shift in the modalities through which ruling blocs attempt to construct hegemony in capitalist class democracies. That was its explicit field of reference. There is little need to elaborate on AS further, if only because Bob Jessop must be thoroughly familiar with it since he is one of Poulantzas’s most meticulous and accomplished commentators and critics, as his forthcoming study will show.

Poulantzas’s concept seemed to me extremely useful—but weak in two major respects. It misread the emerging strategy, since one of the fundamental things which seemed to me to be shifting was precisely the abandonment of the ‘corporatist’ strategy central to Labourism, and its replacement by an ‘anti-statist’ strategy of the ‘New Right’. (An ‘anti-statist’ strategy, incidentally, is not one which refuses to operate through the state; it is one which conceives a more limited state role, and which advances through the attempt, ideologically, to *represent itself* as anti-statist, for the purposes of populist mobilization.) I assumed that this highly contradictory strategy—which we have in fact seen in operation under Thatcherism: simultaneously, dismantling the welfare state, ‘anti-statist’ in its ideological self-representation and highly state-centralist and dirigiste in many of its strategic operations—would inflect politics in new ways and have real political effects.

Secondly, I believed that Poulantzas had neglected the one dimension which, above all others, has defeated the left, politically, and Marxist analysis theoretically, in every advanced capitalist democracy since the

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First World War: namely, the ways in which popular consent can be so constructed, by a historical bloc seeking hegemony, as to harness to its support some popular discontents, neutralize the opposing forces, disaggregate the opposition and really incorporate some strategic elements of popular opinion into its own hegemonic project.

These two arguments led me to build on Poulantzas’s insights, but to shift the characterization of the conjuncture from ‘authoritarian statism’ to ‘authoritarian’ populism’. I hoped by adopting this deliberately contradictory term precisely to encapsulate the contradictory features of the emerging conjuncture: a movement towards a dominative and ‘authoritarian’ form of democratic class politics—paradoxically, apparently rooted in the ‘transformism’ (Gramsci’s term) of populist discontents. This was further elaborated in my article ‘Popular-Democratic versus Authoritarian Populism’, where I drew on the seminal work of Laclau, and his notion of ‘populist rupture’. But I distanced my more delimited use of the term ‘populism’ from his more inclusive one, attempting thereby to distinguish the genuine mobilization of popular demands and discontents from a ‘populist’ mobilization which, at a certain point in its trajectory, flips over or is recuperated into a statist-led political leadership.

Levels of Abstraction

I grant that this genealogy is nowhere fully laid out; though I would claim that it is plain enough from the context and sequence of my work. I also grant that there was too little rigorous or logical ‘construction of concepts’ here. The concepts, I am afraid, were generated in the heat of conjunctural analysis—I was trying to comprehend the shift towards Thatcherism as it was taking place. So, admittedly, the theorization is a bit rough and ready. I explored the idea of ‘passive revolution’, for example; and I still believe it has something to contribute to our understanding of populist (as opposed to popular) strategies. But I could not at the time bring off the link and have not been able to do so since. Like many of Gramsci’s most fruitful concepts, AP remains ‘over-descriptive’. Perhaps I have caught his disease. I suspect that a more fundamental disagreement divides my position from that of Jessop et al here. I do not believe that all concepts operate at the same level of abstraction—indeed, I think one of the principal things which separates me from the fundamentalist marxist revival is precisely that they believe that the concepts which Marx advanced at the highest level of abstraction (i.e. mode of production, capitalist epoch) can be transferred directly into the analysis of concrete historical conjunctures. My own view is that concepts like that of ‘hegemony’ (the family or level of abstraction to which AP also belongs) are of necessity somewhat ‘descriptive’, historically more specific, time-bound, concrete in their reference—because they attempt to conceptualize what Marx himself said of ‘the concrete’: that it is the ‘product of many determinations’. So I have to confess that it was not an error or oversight which determined the level of concreteness at which AP operates. It was quite deliberately and self-consciously not pitched at that level of ‘pure’ theoretical-analytic operation at which Jessop et al seem to assume all concepts must be produced. The costs of operating at this level of abstraction are clear.
But to me—in the wake of the academicizing of Marxism and the theoreticist deluge of the 1970s—so are the gains.

I would argue, therefore, that I have only used AP at the level of abstraction and with the range of reference outlined above. I have never claimed for it the general explanatory sweep which Jessop et al attempt to graft on to it. I am therefore not at all surprised to find that AP is only a partial explanation of Thatcherism. What else could it be? It was an attempt to characterize certain strategic shifts in the political/ideological conjuncture. Essentially, it refers to changes in the 'balance of forces'. It refers directly to the modalities of political and ideological relationships between the ruling bloc, the state and the dominated classes. It attempts to expand on and to begin to periodize the internal composition of hegemonic strategies in the politics of class democracies. Theoretically—if anyone is interested—it is part of a wider project to develop and expand on the rich but too condensed concept of hegemony. It is a sort of footnote to Gramsci's 'Modern Prince' and 'State and Civil Society'. It references, but could neither characterize nor explain, changes in the more structural aspects of capitalist social formations. I do not understand how, even grammatically, AP could have been misunderstood as a concept operating at the latter level. 'In this field, the struggle can and must be carried on by developing the concept of hegemony', Gramsci observed, in The Prison Notebooks, AP is a response to that fateful injunction.

Jessop et al are certainly in need of no further instruction from me about the concept of hegemony. However, I cannot resist pointing out, at this stage in the argument, that I have never advanced the proposition that Thatcherism has achieved 'hegemony'. The idea, to my mind, is preposterous. What I have said is that, in sharp contrast to the political strategy of both the Labourist and the fundamentalist left, Thatcherite politics are 'hegemonic' in their conception and project: the aim is to struggle on several fronts at once, not on the economic-corporate one alone; and this is based on the knowledge that, in order really to dominate and restructure a social formation, political, moral and intellectual leadership must be coupled to economic dominance. The Thatcherites know they must 'win' in civil society as well as in the state. They understand, as the left generally does not, the consequences of the generalization of the class struggle to new arenas and the need to have a strategy for them too. They mean, if possible, to reconstruct the terrain of what is 'taken for granted' in social and political thought—and so to form a new common sense. If one watches how, in the face of a teeth-gritting opposition, they have steadily used the unpopularity of some aspects of trade union practice with their own members to inflict massive wounds on the whole labour movement, or how they have steadily not only pursued the 'privatization' of the public sector but installed 'value for money' at the heart of the calculations of every Labour council and every other social institution—health service, school meals, universities, street cleaning, unemployment benefit offices, social services—one will take this politico-ideological level of struggle somewhat more seriously than the left currently does. That is the project of Thatcherism—from which, I am sufficiently in apostasy to believe, the left has something to learn as to the conduct of political struggle. But
I do not believe and have nowhere advanced the claim that the project has been delivered.

Indeed, I have several times pointed out the yawning discrepancy between Thatcherism’s ideological advances and its economic failures. I have consistently argued against the view that Thatcherite neo-monetarism could provide solutions to Britain’s structural economic crisis. As the authoritarian face of Thatcherism has become—in line with my analysis—more and more pronounced, it seems to me self-evident that Thatcherism remains dominant but not hegemonic. It must impose—because it cannot lead. But I have also tried quite carefully to define what we might mean by its ‘success’. In ‘Thatcherism—A New Stage?’ I said inter alia: ‘It is beset by internal contradictions and subject to real limits. It won a measure of electoral support . . . It cannot deliver on them all . . . It is not touching the structural economic problems at home . . . and it is powerless to ward off the savage effects of a global capitalist recession.’ But I also warned that Thatcherism had won power on ‘a long leash’ and would not be blown off course ‘by an immediate crisis of electoral support’. I added that it would be perfectly possible for Thatcherism to ‘fail’ in delivering a solution to Britain’s economic crisis, and yet to ‘succeed’ ‘in its long-term mission to shift the balance of class forces to the right’. Big capital, I suggested, has supported Thatcherism because it sees in it ‘the only political force capable of altering the relations of forces in a manner favourable to the imposition of capitalist solutions’. In that sense, I argued, ‘the long-term political mission of the radical Right could “succeed” even if this particular Government had to give way to one of another electoral complexion.’ To that extent, I concluded, ‘Thatcherism has irrevocably undermined the old solutions and positions’. That analysis was offered in 1980, but I believe it to have been fundamentally correct and to have been confirmed by subsequent developments. In the face of that, it is ludicrous to suggest that I have argued that Thatcherism has already achieved hegemony.

‘Ideologism?’

This brings us to the charges advanced by Jessop et al of ‘ideologism’. This is so impacted that it is hard to disentangle. First of all I think they are themselves at fault in eliding the levels of political and ideological struggle, and in suppressing what they must know well—the need for concepts which define their specificity. They may be right in saying that AP does not sufficiently distinguish between these two dimensions of struggle. However, I do hold to the position that, in my own work, I have consistently struggled against any definition of hegemony which identifies it as exclusively an ideological phenomenon. On the contrary, I have repeated ad nauseam Gramsci’s argument about hegemony being impossible to conceptualize or achieve without ‘the decisive nucleus of economic activity’. It is therefore particularly galling to be accused of advancing an explanation of Thatcherism as exclusively an ideological phenomenon, simply because I have drawn attention to features of its ideological strategy which are specific and important.

It seems well-nigh impossible on the left to affirm the importance and specificity of a particular level of analysis or arena of struggle without immediately being misunderstood as saying that, because it is important, it is the only one. I have tried in my own work not to make that easy slide. I work on the political/ideological dimension (a) because I happen to have some competence in that area, and (b) because it is often either neglected or reductively treated by the left generally and by some Marxists. But the idea that, because one works at that level, one therefore assumes economic questions to be residual or unimportant is absurd. I think the ideological dimension of Thatcherism to be critical. I am certain the left neither understands it nor knows how to conduct this level of struggle—and is constantly misled by misreading its importance. Hence I was determined to bring out this level of analysis—and AP in part served to do just that. But since AP was never advanced as a general or global explanation, it entailed no prescriptions whatsoever as to the other levels of analysis. The fact is that until these other dimensions are in place alongside the concept of AP, the analysis of Thatcherism remains partial and incomplete. But the ‘foregrounding’ involved in AP was quite deliberate. ‘Bending the twig’ towards the most neglected dimension, against the drift of current discussion, Althusser once called it. Jessop et al have, I think, missed my tactical purpose; they have thereby robbed themselves of insights from which their own analysis might have profited.

When they do turn to the question of ideological foregrounding, I think they misrepresent the work done with AP. Even on the ideological front, Thatcherism has adopted other strategies—like the construction of an intellectual leadership, the formation of a new stratum of ‘organic’ intellectuals, the level of the organization of theoretical ideas in certain strategic academic, research and other intellectual sites—to which I have also drawn attention, but which have nothing whatsoever to do with the AP strategy and the construction of the popular consent to power. Thatcherism also has a distinct political strategy for the internal recomposition of the power bloc and the state machine which is not ‘purely’ ideological—whatever that means—and has little to do with AP. It is true that, when I turn to describing the ideological mechanisms, I use the insights of ‘discourse theory’. That is because I believe that discourse theory has much to tell us about how Thatcherism accomplishes the condensation of different discourses into its contradictory formation, and how it ‘works’ so as to recruit people to its different, often contradictory, subject positions: even though it has only had partial success in its project to construct a new kind of political ‘subject’. But I have long ago definitively dissociated myself from the discourse theoretical approach to the analysis of whole social formations, or even from the idea that the production of new subjectivities provides, in itself, an adequate theory of ideology (as opposed to a critical aspect of its functioning).5 I have characterized that as a species—long familiar to the tradition of ‘Western Marxism’—of neo-Kantianism. In doing so, I have also tried carefully to demarcate the immensely fruitful things which I learned from Ernesto Laclau’s Politics and Ideology in Marxist

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Theory from the dissolution of everything into discourse which, I believe, mars the later volume, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, despite its many insights. These distinctions were widely debated in the so-called ‘Hegemony Group’ in 1980–83, in which Jessop himself took a leading role, so I find it difficult to be now mis-identified by Jessop et al with the latter position.

I believe from what I have already said that it is also quite difficult to sustain the charge that I treat Thatcherism as an ‘uncontradictory monolith’. The entire thrust of my work on the ideology of Thatcherism has been to try to show how Thatcherism has managed to stitch up or ‘unify’ the contradictory strands in its discourse—the resonant themes of organic Toryism—nation, family, duty, authority, standards, traditionalism, patriarchalism—with the aggressive themes of a revived neoliberalism—self-interest, competitive individualism, anti-statism’, as I put it in ‘The Great Moving Right Show’. In the same piece, I pointed to the highly contradictory subject-positions which Thatcherism was attempting to condense. I deliberately adopted Gamble’s brief but telling paradox—‘free market, strong state’. How all this could be described as representing Thatcherism as an uncontradictory ideological monolith beats me. Nor do Jessop et al score points by showing that many of these elements in Thatcherism are not new. ‘Some of these,’ I said in the very next sentence, had been secured in earlier times through the grand themes of one-Nation popular Conservatism: the means by which Toryism circumnavigated democracy.’ I thought this of particular importance in giving substance to Gramsci’s argument that, often, ideological shifts take place, not by substituting one, whole, new conception of the world for another, but by presenting a novel combination of old and new elements—a process of distinction and of change in the relative weight possessed by the elements of the old ideology’. I don’t see how all that could conceivably be construed as endowing Thatcherism with an ‘excessively unified image’.

The Keynesian Welfare State

For the reasons I have already advanced, there are many things which Jessop et al argue in the succeeding sections of their article with which I wholeheartedly agree. Their analysis and mine are only, I am afraid, in competition with one another in the rather spurious atmosphere of polemical contestation which they quite unnecessarily generated. Nevertheless, I believe that the failures they show in understanding how AP works carry over into their own substantive analysis. Thus they repeat the now-familiar, lefter-than-thou, argument that the break-up of the post-war consensus could not be of much political significance because the ‘Keynesian Welfare State’ (KWS) was never ‘socialist’. This is supposed to inflict further damage on the concept of AP. However, I am perfectly well aware that the KWS was not socialist. In Policing the Crisis I spent a great deal of space analysing the limits of the KWS and spelling out the contradiction of Labour in power, which I quite

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specifically characterized as ‘social democratic’ not socialist in political content. The argument has, so far as I know, never been that the KWS was ‘socialist’ and that we should therefore now go back to it. That is a figment of the fundamentalist left imagination. What I have argued and do argue is that the KWS was a contradictory structure, a ‘historic compromise’, which both achieved something in a reformist direction for the working class and became an instrument in disciplining it. Why else should anyone on the left be now campaigning for the restoration of the cuts in the welfare state if it did nothing for the working class? I have also argued that, if we cannot mobilize a full-scale popular agitation around the limited demands of maintaining and expanding ‘welfare state reformism’, on what grounds could we conceivably conceptualize the political conjuncture as one likely to lead to an ‘irreversible shift of power’ towards immediate working-class power? I keep not getting an answer to this conundrum, and must presume this is because the symbolics of who can swear loudest at the reformism of Labour governments is more important on the left than hard analysis. It seems to be convenient to answer, not the question I pose but another, fictional one because the latter usefully demonstrates the degree of my apostasy! I am surprised to find Jessop et al allowing themselves to drift into that vulgar exercise.

I have other problems with the analysis they advance, though on these I can be briefer. I do not find the ‘two nations’ hypothesis at all convincing. ‘Good citizen’ and ‘hard worker’ seem to me poor characterizations of the critical points of reference in the Thatcherite strategy. Thatcherism deliberately—and from its viewpoint, correctly—eschews all reference to the concept of citizenship. ‘Worker’ is also a difficult one for it to negotiate, and it constantly prefers ‘wealth creator’. Jessop et al pose the ‘hard’ question of the relation of Thatcherism to specific class interests’. But they fail to provide the non-class-reductionist articulation to class positions they call for. ‘An uneasy and unstable alliance of interests? Amen—but we all got as far as that long ago. I also think that Jessop et al are still too mesmerized by a problem which has long ago disappeared, in the sociological form in which it was carefully tended in the 1970s, into the oblivion. That is the question of ‘corporatism’. The problems to which ‘corporatism’ was a response in the 1970s remain. The corporatist strategy is in abeyance—one of Thatcherism’s accomplishments: though a healthy dose of Kinnochism will undoubtedly revive its deeply undemocratic features and endow it with a life-after-death.

On many other aspects of the Jessop et al analysis I do not substantially differ. But on the central thrust of the argument, I think their article sophisticated but mistaken. They have badly skewed their own analysis and our general understanding of the Thatcherism phenomenon by entering into a misconceived confrontation with my work and with the concept of AP. They have profoundly mis-read the entire Gramscian terrain in which, from beginning to end, the whole AP discussion has been rooted. I am afraid they have sometimes had their eye cocked more towards scoring points than deconstructing Thatcherism. Nevertheless, they have contributed substantially to our understanding of many of its perplexing aspects. Perhaps, now that the sound of conceptual gunfire
has died away, we might all get back to the far more important task of understanding the real complexity of the Thatcherism phenomenon, the better to defeat and destroy it.