The Conservatives' representation of Socialism and Liberalism during parliamentary debates since the 90s.

Stéphane Revillet

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INTRO

In a speech at a Demos conference in 2006, David Cameron wondered how the Conservative party which had defined themselves as the antisocialist Party, were to re-define themselves once full-blooded socialism had disappeared from the political landscape.

The solution has proved quite simple, the Conservatives would keep portraying socialism as the arch-enemy of the nation, especially in the form that the Labour party would alledgedly embody it, while at the same time successive Conservative leaders would promote their own ideology : a blend of conservatism and liberalism.

Socialism and liberalism are ideologies which, in Michael Freeden's terms "are not an exact representation of an ideational reality, but a symbolic reconstruction of it"[1]. This process of reconstruction will be the focus for our analysis in the context of Prime Minister's Question Time = PMQs. Parliamentary debates and particularly PMQs are one of the most effective way for leaders to promote their ideas. These debates are the most watched and the most attended parliamentary events of the week, and its adversarial and confrontational nature contributes to mark differences between the opposing groups.

In the light of these preliminary remarks, this paper aims to explore the way the Conservatives represent socialism as a mirror image of their own ideology based on liberalism. Subsenquently, I will try to analyse the effects of such a representational process on the identity of the party especially when the ideological lines no longer run in intrinsically /ɪnˈtrɪn.zɪ.kəl.i/ opposed ways.

[1] Freeden M. Ideologies : A very Short Intro Oxford 2003

First of all, let's examine how the successive Conservative leaders have portrayed socialism in Parliamentary debates since John Major (from the early 1990s)

1 – Representation of socialism

(As you can see on the slide) I've organised the main features of **Labour socialism** as follows :

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Ideologies and movements associated with Labour's socialism	**Key concepts of Labour's socialism**	**Liberalism in practice = through Economic policies**
(it i*ncludes :*) Marxism Stalinism Communism Unionism Trostkyism Luddites	(*It relies on : it is based on :*) A centralist state controlling private sector (Re)Nationalisation Corporatism common ownership Trade Unonism Welfare (state) state Interventionalism unilateralism	(It implies :) High spending (socialist councils) borrowing higher taxes State subsidies Keynesian tradition giving up nuclear deterrent high benefits and allowances

Those concepts and policies described by the Conservatives in this particular context constitute a loose and biased definition of what socialism is. And this interpretation is rendered through a negative

depiction of what socialism is and this portrayal heavily relies on (rather violent) verbal attacks worded in the most deregatory and disparaging terms.

I have classified those attacks into 3 different categories : exaggerations, insults and straplines

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First : Exaggerations + (hyperboles)	Second : insults and jibes	Finally : straplines + soundbites + repetitions
Marxist universe appealing to tribal socialism Lab only trade deals with Venezuela, Cuba and North Korea Lab dislike choice of almost any sort + the hatred of diversity and excellence **unilateral disarmer** with lab we would be living in **an underprotected overtaxed socialist backwater** Lab party obsessed with bigger and bigger benefits (16/02/11) / 11/01/12 : lab= out-of-control	Labour's **bossy centralising interefering approach** (27/10/10/) /19/07/17 : lab : a hard-left, old-fashioned Socialist gvt Reheated **hard left Marxism** **The Red Princes/ peaceniks** **Loony left** (27/04/11) / Calls for more taxes are being made by the **ever-loony lab** (04/11/93) 27/02/13 : they are not only socialists but **incompetent socialists to boot** Lab= want to borrow / spend less by borrowing/spending more **= LO Bert in the Muppet show living on Sesame Street Common ownership = a**	**If you vote red you live in the red** **one size fits all, take it or leave it** IF Lo is trying to move left, I'd give him full Marks **Greekonomics / nannying intervention** **19**/11/96 Because of last **socialist gvt** = Britain was sick man of europe Lab party = **anti-enterprise, anti-business, anti-growth** (05/02/14 /+ 02/04/2014) anti-market, anti-competition 04/02/15 **« tax, tax, tax, injustice, injustice, injustice** 10/07/19

benefit system **=** (+01/02/12 + he is the party for **unlimited welfare** Labour hates privatisation and **it hates profit.** It cannot stand share ownership	**dinosaur** (07/03/95 the nature of **the Labour beast** Labour needs more democracy (17/07/93) **The unions are the dog and the Labour is the lampost** (15/07/93) He (J Corbyn) is **Caracas** (04/09/2019)	unions own the Labour Party practically **lock, stock and barrel** **vote for it, pay for it** **sthg-for-nothing culture = lab welfare**

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Labour and socialism merge into a negative symbol

The lack of nuance or mitigation of the attacks are deliberate. The rhetorical strategy of using hyperboles and caricature and slogans serves a specific purpose = turning socialism and the Labour party into symbolic objects.

What is a symbol ? Definition of a symbol (the political uses of symbols, cobb, p 29) : a symbol is a human invention and arises from the process of attributing meaning to an object (anything can be a symbol : a word, a phrase, a gesture, an event, a person, a place, a thing, in our case it is a political party and their ideology). That is to say the signifier, here socialism, is imbued with a rich diversity of meanings, values and significance. Edward Sapir and later Murray Edelman called such symbols : condensational symbols (as opposed to referential symbols which are purely denotative and stipulative) ; they serve to summerize and condense experiences, feelings and beliefs (p 29). **[**They emerge from an ongoing process of social interaction and communication those symbols circulates among members of the party and beyond ; they are created, recognized and understood by the members of the group**]**

As explained earlier, symbols are initially used as a vehicle for condensing and simplifying a variety of stimuli (ref ?). The more stimuli a symbol triggers, the more potent the symbol is.

The power of such symbols lies in their emotional force and impact. Condensation symbols are heavily laden with emotive content. Their emotional force supersedes / overweighs the rationality of any argument.
In order to strike a chord among voters and draw their support, leaders will increase the emotional impact of the symbols they wield as a political weapon.
To do so the members and leaders of the parliamentary group will attack the **moral values** of socialism. This tactic is all the more relevant since scholars like Donald Kinder, Mark Peters, or Ian Mc Allister (2000) have ranked honesty and integrity as the first quality people expect from their politicians in office.

The Conservatives will strive to demonstrate that the Labour party as a socialist party has fallen below moral and ethical standards

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Socialism tied with/ linked with :
CORRUPTION : the depth of **corruption** and despair=result of lab local authorities -→**the worst local authorities are socialist local authorities** **Tax avoidance** (ref to ken livingstone) = **modern socialism** (18/04/12) **Cronyism** 21/11/96 : **crony** politics = lab get $ from union and silence on strike Labour and Liberal councillors are more interested in **jobs for the boys** than in value for money for the ratepayers **LACK OF TRANSPARENCY AND DEMOCRACY** Lab = donations (from unions) buy + trade **unions buy their lab candidates and buy their policies and pick LO =** that is **wrong with British politics** (25/02/15)/ rigged appointments = a sad day for democracy (03/07/13) + Lab's relationship with unions is **a disgrace to British democracy** Lab **= Quangocracy** 09/06/2010 : lab becoming **more and more authoritarian**

living up to the words of Marx : « those are my principles, and if you don't like them, well, I have other = Groucho Marx

DEVIANT /ˈdiːviənt/**/ UNAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOUR**

Unison threatens councils if they accept contracts from private firms = **labour using bully-boy** tactics

(20/02/19) chosen to leave Jeremy Corbyn's Labour party and join the Conservatives, due to the **bullying and antisemitism** that she has received **from Momentum** and the **hard left**

Lab **Marxist** and **antisemite** (03/04/19)
Schools hijacked in 60s/70s by the **trendy lefties** and now **no moral base** (02 /03/93)

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Ideologies in a mythical world

The creation of such symbols stems from the need to distinguish among people and to establish or to affirm social identities.
They reinforce the dichotomy /**daɪˈkɒ**təmi/ between **US and THEM**.
The conservatives' strategy is **to create a clear-cut ideological divide** between their group and their political opponents.
-→The Labour is no longer an adversary who is "an acceptable opponent" but an **enemy : an unacceptable opponent** (M ELdelman)
This merger of Labour and socialism into one negative symbol reflects **Jo**hnathan Leader Maynard's contention that "ideologies are so fundamentally bound up with identities, and identities are inextricably ideological"; the Labour party has been made the **enemies** of the country. Enemies are identifiable and/or stereotypes of persons. They are at**tri**buted **inherent traits that mark them as evil and immoral**, which makes it psychologically and ethically possible to attack them *ad hominen* or to kill them in a symbolic way, of course. This enemy becomes a common cause to fight against thereby **reinforcing the conservative group's unity and identity. (**Lucien Sfez p 97)

In sum : the sort of socialism embodied by the Labour party has become a symbol. It poses
a **critical threat** to the country, with trade unionists who "want to disrupt our schools, our borders and our counrty"**.**
A threat to moral values, low ethical standards go hand in hand with socialism, besides socialism creates a society of "shirkers" enslaved by state benefits and not of strivers according to Cameron.
A threat to the economy = Labour wants to overthrow capitalism (23/05/18)
Ideological Labour (socialism) gvt causing chaos and disruption (04/03/97)
More importantly :
A threat to democracy and individuality : Britain would become another North Korea, where centralized control of economic activities leads to political repression **[+** champions of Common ownership, no choice. **]**

↳ Labour's socialism= **have become the symbol of a threat to people's basic right to freedom** = a core concept of liberalism.

The creation of such symbols generates archetypical patterns which pertain to the realm of the myth (M Eldeman p14-15). At the other end of the good-evil spectrum stand the Conservatives posing as the saviours, those who will restore people's liberty

Viewed through the lens of Isahia Berlin's concept of freedom, only the conservative liberal policies will provide both negative and positive freedom. The narrow (rather warped) interpretation of Classical liberalism will release people from a large number of constraints (be it the state or the trade unions or even socialist policies) and allow them to have the necessary means or resources to act upon their will. In

short, deregulation, free market, privatisation (also known as the D-L-P formula) and choice for exemple will help improve salaries, provide better school / education and so on…

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The Conservatives' representation of liberalism

Those liberal tenets framed within conservatism are promoted through a mirror image in exact opposition to socialism. The very same process is at play here in the representation of liberalism from a conservatives' point of view :

First they will decontest the notion (M. Freeden) = they'll **'ci**rcumscribe one aspect of Liberalism =namely economic liberalism/ field (especially in the 80s and 90s)

---→ they associate **positive notions** with the principles underpinning Liberalism

For ex : Liberalism is "a success" = even socialist countries have adopted **eco** liberalism + Privatisation = great / remarkable success and good for the taxpayers, good for country

16/02/11 : deregulation is an extremely powerful weapon in economic reform

Highlighting the core concept of liberalism = i.e freedom ----→ Free trade 20/02/1996 : Mr peter Ainsworth extolling the virtues of liberalism as a catalyst for freedom as it is based "on free trade, free markets, free enterprise policies and freedom from social chapter"= that is a typical Classical approach to liberalism (supported by Adam smith…) = symbol of freedom

----→ attaching **positive moral values** to liberalism= Free trade and deregulation encourage innovation and self-respect /+ liberalism = just and ethical

[+ 25/10/94, col 756 : a Conservative MP explains that denationalisation would stop cronyism preventing " the Government from appointing their own placemen to run half of British industry"**]**

BUT

The flip side of symbols = they evolve, because they are constructed upon some ambiguity and looseness in their referents = The relationship between signifier and signified can change over time. New meanings can be infused into a symbol. In the early years of 2000 the type of economic liberalism the Conservatives had championed and put into practice started to evoke negative meanings and arouse negative feelings even among Conservatives. In 2002, Theresa May called her own party the 'nasty party' in reference to the 'rampant materialism and individualism attached to their liberal policies. Consequently, she called for a shift away from that type of liberalism towards what Cameron would call 'progressive compassionate conservatism'.

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Social liberalism as a tool to detoxify the party

Conversely, the Conservatives' representation of socialism has not changed. The same meaning has been associated with socialism over the conservative premierships. As explained earleir, the type of liberalism the Conservatives champion is defined through a reverse image of what socialism stands for them. This stability in the representation of socialism sheds light on the multifaceted liberalism the Conservatives support. In addition to the new rhetoric imbued with social liberal tenets, neo classical liberalism is implicitly defined in opposition to the principles of socialism. In reference to Michael Freeden's layers of liberalism, one can state that the conservatives rely

pre'dominantly on two different layers of liberalism (an implicit neo liberalism and an overt social liberalism at least on the face of it). This is best exemplified by David Cameron's defining himself as a 'liberal conservative' (Hayton) using the ambiguity of the term as **a dog whistle** to appeal to a wide range of individuals with con**'**flicting views. Cameron promoted a more socially inclusive and compassionate Conservatism (Dorey, 2007, p137) while at the same time praising the success of privatisation (30/04/14, col 818 + 819), supporting a reduction in the money spent on welfare programmes (13/01/16, 17/12/14, 06/02/13) and advertising the conservative party as the party of 'aspiration and enterprise' or relying on neo-liberal principles like the reduction of bureaucracy and allowances (02/03/11), the promotion of workfare instead of welfare, and of anti-unionization drives.

The bottom line is to make one's ideology and ideas appealing to the "many not the few". And as demonstrated earlier, symbols are formidable weapons to reach the masses, as Muray Edelman explains :

"people think in terms of stereotypes and oversimplifications due to some incapacity to "recognize or tolerate ambiguous and complex situations and respond chiefly to symbols that oversimplify and distort".

Put more simply, political symbols function as semantic short-cuts which make it easier for people to treat concepts as things"(D. kertzer).

Liberalism and Socialism and Conservatism are ideologies which rely largely on simplification even oversimplification (M. Freeden) ; so much so that they have become symbols and function as such (M. Freeden), which makes them easy to identify, to understand and to oppose. This symbolization of ideologies results in the reification of opposing ideological lines (M. Edelman)

BUT what happens when those dividing ideological lines between parties no longer run in striclty opposing ways ?

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3 – Blurred lines

As said ealier, the Conservatives' discourse moved to the centre (from Cameron) using a more social liberal rhetoric in a bid to detoxify the 'nasty party'. (Heppell, 2014, p155).

In the late 90s, the Labour party for their part, moved to the centre too with a unavowed neoliberal approach (Bob Jessop, 2003) this shift was illustrated in Blair's new scheme called ' Stakeholding Society'.

In 1995, the British Labour Party officially announced its abandonment of its commitment to the "common ownership of the means of production". Not long after that, in January 1996 Tony Blair set out his vision of a "stakeholder economy/ stakeholding society" one in which "we shift the emphasis […] towards a vision of the company as a community or partnership in which each employee has a stake", but also customers, employees, suppliers and the community at large = opening the door to a left-of-centre project for gvt.

The term shareholding society is an umbrella concept, loose and ambivalent giving the British people a proper stake in their country (Mr Sheerman, 25/01/96). A symbol laden with both neo liberal substance and social overtones.

The conservatives recognised the danger of allowing the stakeholder concept a free run and decided to counter attack to defend their territory and launched a blitz battle just over a couple of weeks. The Conservatives fought hard to prevent the term stakeholding society from becoming a Labour-owned issue. They forcefully imposed their own defintion of the concept through the lens of biased interpretations depending on which party the term is related to.

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Conservative's stakeholding society January 1996	Conservatives's view on Labour's stakholding society January 1996
…to give people a stake in society is to allow them to own their homes, to own shares, to have their own pension schemes and, above all, to pay low taxes? We know and have been practising what it means for the past 16 years. It means giving people a direct, personal interest in what happens—lower taxes, more home ownership, more personal pensions—exercised by the holders themselves Private ownership enables people to have, if I may use the phrase, a stake in this country	The Leader of the Opposition now tells us that it is a slogan, and the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) tells us that he has not the faintest idea what it means. Labour party's vision of a stakeholding society, which would place burdens on business men and, indeed, bring back vested interests in Labour's old friends? exercised by the holders themselves We know who Labour's stakeholders are. We know who owns 50 per cent. of the votes at the Labour party conference. We know who pays 50 per cent. of the money that the Labour party gets . They are Labour's stakeholders. That union sponsors the deputy leader of the Labour party; it is one of the stakeholders in the Labour party that he has accepted totally the philosophy of the party that he has fought all his political life?

[As in a trademark dispute the owners are fighting for their exclusive rights on the concept of stakeholding society. The Conservatives did their best to stop the Labour party from creating a symbol out of this concept commonly associated with the Tory party. The Labour eventually gave up this concept (according to Labour's experts stakeholding as an idea would jeopardise New Labour's relations with the business community)**]**

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The Conservatives claiming credit for Labour's achievements

Now on the Conservatives' side :

Besides creating programmes, schemes and slogans resonating with explicit social liberal undertones (like : popular capitalism, progressive compassionate gvt, help to buy, shared society, do the right thing, or more recently B. Johnson's **levelling up** rhetoric. David Cameron and Theresa May put a lot of effort into decoupling social issues from the Labour party. They went as far as creating confusion around the origins of social programmes like the NHS and the National Minimum Wage claiming ownership of such symbols of social policies.

EX :

> --→19/07/17 [Theresa May] But what is important for Government as well is to ensure that we provide support to people. That is why we created the national living wage. That was the biggest pay increase ever for people on the lowest incomes. **When did the Labour party ever introduce the national living wage? Never! That was a Conservative Government and a Conservative record.**
>
> --→11/05/16 [David Cameron] The best thing that we can do for workers' rights in this country is to celebrate the national living wage, introduced by a Tory Government.

HOWEVER, the National Living Wage was simply a renaming of the National Minimum Wage/ basically, the Government's National Living Wage was actually just a new minimum wage for workers aged over 25, but rebranded as The National Living Wage in 2015

→ **Not a new strategy** = it reminds us of J. Major's attempts at claiming credit for the NHS in the late 90s : →21/01/97 : it is perfectly true that the Labour party established the national health service but it is the

Conservative party that has built up the health service. We have been in power for two thirds of the period that has elapsed since then, **and we have built up the health service from its beginnings** into a service that is now recognised as the best in the world. + 18/03/97 : The Labour party may have set up the health service, but we have built it up.

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Claiming filiation with Labour's prominent figures

➲ **Using prominent Labour figures to give credit to their move towards a more social stance = Claiming Labour's heritage / legacy =** They'll use names like (William) Beveridge, (Aneurin) Bevan, (Clement) Atlee, and so on, which became symbols of social progress. In the process they (rhetorically) insert themselves into the Labour party's lineage, claiming a sort of parentage with those figures. Such a move can be interpreted as a way of claiming ownership of major social programmes initatiated by those post-war Labour political figures.

Through references to famous rhetoric used by Beveridge for ex :

> 01/05/19 : We have been ensuring that we provide for people **at every stage of their lives**. For young people in particular, we are ensuring that they have the opportunities to lead full and healthy lives into the future.and ensuring that we provide for them not just through the welfare system but with our long-term plan for the national health service. **At every stage of life**, we are ensuring that we as Conservatives are improving people's lives—

This resonates with the famous phrase from the Beveridge Report 'from the cradle to the grave'

➲ By creating filial intimacy with those politicians and pretending to know what they would do/want they reinforce the impression of belonging to the same ideological lineage.

> 05/03 2014 : That is more nurses in our NHS than at any time since Nye Bevan stood at this Dispatch Box back in the 1940s, and that is a record of which the Government can be proud.
>
> BEVAN 24/02/16 : I think that if Nye Bevan were here today, he would want a seven-day NHS, because he knew that the NHS was for patients up and down our country.
>
> 29/06/11 Will the Prime Minister agree that Aneurin Bevan would be turning in his grave as he sees a Conservative Secretary of State increase spending on the health service in England while a Labour Government in Cardiff cut spending on the NHS ?

----→ very ironical though because at a party rally in 1948, during a speech, Bevan stated: “So far as I am concerned they are lower than vermin”.

[20/02/19 : What do we see from his Labour party ? Hamas and Hezbollah are friends, and Israel and the United States are enemies; Hatton a hero, and Churchill a villain. Attlee and Bevan will be spinning in their graves. That is what the right hon. Gentleman has done to a once-proud Labour party. We will never let him do it to our country.]

CONCLUSION

Through a typical and symbolic representation of socialism set in opposition to a successful and emancipating liberalism, the Conservatives intend to widen the ideological and identity gap between their group and the opposition. Liberalism is a multifaceted ideology made of several conceptual layers and interpretations and leaders will make a symbol of it to serve their own purpose. As symbols derive their power from their ambiguity and ambivalence, they can

also put the users of such symbols at odds with some members of their group who support clear-cul ideological lines between opposing political parties. When the conservative leaders move too far on the progressive side of liberalism (on the face of it at least) they risk alienating a part of their support as evidenced in Philip Davies's following question :

23/05/2018 : **[**May I paraphrase our former colleague, the late, great Eric Forth? **]** Prime Minister, I believe in the free market, I believe in individual freedom and individual responsibility, and I am suspicious of the nanny state. Am I still a Conservative ?

Stéphane REVILLET

Centre Interlangues-Texte, Image, Langage (EA 4182)
Univ. Bourgogne Franche-Comté, F-21000, Dijon