The Triumph of Post-Democratic Values:
Blairism and British Political Culture in the Eyes of Peter Oborne

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ABSTRACT

The following article deals with the work of distinguished British conservative journalist and public intellectual Peter Oborne (b. 1957). In his published oeuvre, Oborne has been particularly concerned with the political culture during the administration of Anthony Charles Lynton Blair (1997-2007). This article analyses Oborne's books and focuses on his major themes: his concept of the British "Political Class" as well as the deterioration of standard British institutions, the rise of the media, the widespread mendacity of British politicians and, finally, the triumph of "post-democratic" values characterized by a slow demise of the British electorate in relation to the political process. The article discusses wider contexts of contemporary British conservatism and assesses Oborne's contribution to the debate about the perspectives of British political identity and its cultural and democratic traditions.

Introduction

Recent publications by distinguished conservative British public intellectuals (Peter Hitchens, Roger Scruton, Peregrine Worsthorne, Simon Heffer, Melanie Phillips, etc.[1]) tend to focus primarily on two issues: a perceived degeneration of British cultural and political identity, and the wider contexts of the dissolution of elite Western culture, representative democracy and the notion of individual responsibility. One of the most targeted topics of their analyses has been the impact of the so-called "Blair Revolution" on British political culture, especially the gradual decline of accountability of politicians from across the political spectrum, their use of empty populist rhetoric to obfuscate real problems for example through the rise of spin-doctor culture, as well as widespread mendacity regarding a number of issues (economic and social reforms, foreign policy including the war in Iraq, gatekeeper arrangements with media tycoons, etc.). Some even saw the rise of Blairite Britain as a climax of a long process of "the abolition of Britain" which started with the sweeping reforms of the 1960s.[2]

In the following article I am going to present and analyse the work of Peter Oborne (b. 1957), a long-time political reporter from Westminster and an influential journalist for the *Evening Standard* and *Sunday Express* as well as the former chief political commentator of *The Daily Telegraph.* Oborne currently maintains the post of the associate editor of the conservative weekly magazine *The Spectator.* His analyses of British political

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1 I discuss the work of these authors in my earlier work on Peter Hitchens: "Rage, Delusion and Abolitionism: Contemporary British Society in the Eyes of Peter Hitchens" *American and British Studies Annual* 5 (2012), 72.

2 This view is outlined in Peter Hitchens' *The Abolition of Britain,* first published in 1999. (London: Quartet Books, 1999).

culture during the "Blair Revolution" present a vital contribution to the debate about the present and future of British democracy and the values it is built on.

After a short biographical note on Oborne, I am going to deal with the specific issues he raises in order to define his idea of "post-democratic" Britain. This will finally be assessed in the context of wider considerations about the nature of British identity and its political and cultural traditions.

Peter Oborne as a journalist and analyst of British political culture

Between 1997-2010 (i.e. the years of New Labour rule), Peter Oborne published not only countless newspaper and magazine articles, but also a handful of books which aspired to provide a deeper analysis into the essence of the changes that came into British political practice with the rise of Blairism. Oborne's *Alastair Campbell: New Labour and the Rise of the Media Class* (1999/2004)[3] concerns the election and tenure of the Blairite government and the influence of the main Downing Street "spin-doctor" Alastair Campbell (b. 1957); *The Rise of Political Lying* (2005)[4] analyses the rampant mendacity in British politics and its dramatic consequences; finally, *The Triumph of Political Class* (2007)[5] exposes the gradual distancing of British politicians from their voters as well as political and discursive strategies used in defining the exclusiveness of the "Political Class". Oborne is also known for his outstanding sport journalism[6] as well as for his numerous works/pamphlets published in the Centre for Policy Studies in London, founded in 1974 by Margaret Thatcher and Sir Keith Joseph as an independent think tank for conservative values.[7] He also published a patriotic *cri-de-coeur* defending the Churchillian idea that "the great principles of freedom and the rights of man which are the joint inheritance of the English-speaking world" as well as the conviction that the Human Rights Act of 1998 is based on genuinely conservative convictions.[8] Oborne has also been active as a writer of TV documentaries on subjects ranging from human rights

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3 Peter Oborne, *Alastair Campbell: New Labour and the Rise of the Media Class* (London: Aurum, 1999), later revised and published co-authored with Simon Walters as *Alastair Campbell* (London: Aurum, 2004).

4 Peter Oborne, *The Rise of Political Lying* (London: Free Press, 2005).

5 Peter Oborne, *The Triumph of the Political Class* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2007).

6 Here I am referring mainly to his award winning biography of South-African cricketer Basil D'Oliviera (1931-2011) and the player's conflict with the apartheid regime: *Basil D'Oliviera: Cricket and Conspiracy: The Untold Story* (London: Time Warner, 2005) or his recent work on cricket in Pakistan: *Wounded Tiger: The History of Cricket in Pakistan.* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2014).

7 These works include *A moral duty to act there* (London: Centre for Policy Studies, 2003) about the alarming situation in Zimbabwe; *The Use and Abuse of Terror: The Construction of a False Narrative on Domestic Terror Threat* (London: Centre for Policy Studies, 2006) about Tony Blair's use and abuse of the terrorist threat during his government's tenure; *Guilty Men* (London: Centre for Policy Studies, 2011), co-written with Frances Weaver about the supposed dangers of Britain's acceptance of the Euro. Wider information on the range of activities and further publications of the Centre for Policy Studies can be found on their website http://www.cps.org.uk/ (accessed May 12, 2015).

8 See *Churchill's Legacy: The Conservative Case for the Human Rights Act* (London: Liberty, 2009), co-written with Conservative MP Jesse Norman. The quoted sentence is from Churchill's "Iron Curtain" speech, presented in Fulton Missouri in 1946. See Oborne, Norman, *Churchill's Legacy: The Conservative Case for the Human Rights Act*, 6.

issues to the political "afterlife" of Tony Blair after his resignation.[9] For his achievement he was shortlisted for the 2009 Orwell Prize for Journalism.[10]

Oborne's "political geography" of New Labour must start with the key term he (re)introduces into the arena of British politics, the "Political Class." In fact, an analysis of the culture of this apparently new British ruling class is the key to his understanding of the perceived decline of British democracy.

The concept of the "Political Class"

Oborne takes the term "political class" (it. *classe politica*) from an influential treatise of an Italian lawyer and social theorist Gaetano Mosca (1858-1941) *Elementi di Scienza Politica*, first published in 1896 and translated into English in 1939 as *The Ruling Class*.[11] Mosca's concept presupposes that the stability of different societies is in proportion to the leadership qualities and the flexibility of this group of citizens. Fully in line with the Italian tradition of Machiavellism, he challenges the Marxist concept of class that later became prevalent in the thought of European intellectuals. For Mosca, every society develops a "political formula" which aims at justifying the claim of the ruling group for political power which includes a structured complex of beliefs and ethical principles taken to represent the "truth" and is "accepted by those who are ruled."[12] Moreover, this "Ruling" (or, indeed, "Political") Class is fully dependent on the state. In this sense, his theory reflects the ambitions of continental powers in the late 1800s, with some historians associating this concept with the rise of fascism in the first half of the 20th century.[13] For Oborne, this concept of the ruling/political class is nevertheless deeply at odds with the traditions of political culture as it was defined roughly at the same time in Britain: "The Victorians had created something extremely unusual in the long history of political society: the idea of an unselfish public domain and an altruistic governing class."[14]

This British conception, however, presupposes a fundamental value consensus on the scope and limits of politics.[15] Indeed, many institutions are apolitical, as they represent values that cannot be generated by the "Political Class," as is the case, e.g. with

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9   I am referring to his highly critical documentary *The Wonderful World of Tony Blair*, directed by James Brabazon and produced for Channel 4 in September 2011. The document is accessible at http://www.veoh. com/watch/v35764852KW2r9yxj?h1=Dispatches+the+wonderful+world+of+Tony+Blair (accessed May 12, 2015).

10 See Owen, Amos, "Shortlists announced for Orwell Prize for political writing", http://www.pressgazette. co.uk/node/43424, (accessed May 12, 2015).

11 Cf. Oborne, *The Triumph of the Political Class*, 20-21. Oborne does not seem to thematise the difference between the translation ("Ruling Class") and his literal transcription of the term ("Political Class"). In this sense, he understands the terms as identical and interchangeable. See also Gaetano Mosca, *The Ruling Class*, transl. by Hannah D. Kahn (New York: McGraw Hill Company, 1939). This book can also be accessed online at https://archive.org/stream/rulingclass031748mbp#page/n9/mode/2up (accessed May 12, 2015).

12 Arthur Livingston's introduction to Gaetano Mosca, *The Ruling Class*, xv.

13 Oborne, *The Triumph of the Political Class*, 21.

14 Oborne, *The Triumph of the Political Class*, xv.

15 "England was one of the few countries in the world with a recognised route to the top through some other means than wealth, intrigue and intimidation. In theory at least honours were earned through service: they were a reward for the fulfilment of duty and could be acquired through charitable work, military prowess or the furtherance of public-spirited causes. They added grace and glamour to drudgery, and both perpetuated the class system and moralised it, by making virtue a route to social status. They therefore contributed to the English gentleness, in all senses of that necessary word." Roger Scruton, *England: an Elegy*. (Pimlico: London, 2001), 192.

the civil service or universities.[16] British democracy was thus defined as a representative democracy of self-confident voters, i.e. individuals who are fully aware of their responsibility.[17] Oborne argues that the current Political Class in Britain no longer mirrors the "unselfish" idea of common good, but much more the continental traditions of a self-interested elite who tends to represent nobody but themselves[18]:

> *By the turn of the twentieth century Gaetano Mosca's concept of Political Class – self-interested, self-aware and dependant for its economic and moral status on the resources of the state – was no longer an archaic and quaint idea. Instead it had become the most lucid representation of how politics worked today not just in Europe, but also in Britain.*[19]

In the twentieth century, the undisputed core standards for British social and economic structure was, indeed, given by the Establishment. According to Oborne, this prestigious status has now been conquered by the Political Class.[20] The cultural expressions of the Political Class, in fact, correspond to the forms which used to be characteristic of the Establishment: this regards *accent and speech*, *sartorial customs*, *emphasis on their own status*, *rites of entry*, *structures of belief* and a set of *value assumptions* vaguely based on the consensus typical for the *revolt and anti-establishmentism* of the 1960s. In that sense, Oborne's "anatomy of the political class" uncovers the layers of social change which have taken place in British society since the 1960s and what we may call sociological substitution of standards traditionally associated with the British "Establishment."[21] Indeed, if the Political Class really succeeded the Establishment as the new crucial reference group for determining the "aspiration of Britishness," than the traditions of stable British customs, conventions and institutions – understood as antidotes against the vicissitudes of dramatic social upheavals – become vulnerable. Traditional British political culture might have been dull, but it was – according to Oborne – driven by a *sense of responsibility to the common good and the traditions of the past*. In fact, the forms of the new Political Class supposedly reflect precisely the opposite of this tradition of decorum and restraint.

Oborne elaborates on the typical expressions of this general tendency. In the domain of *speech and accent*, the use of Received Pronunciation in the public sphere was "designed to convey no information about the speaker's regional origins,"[22] thus in the regional affiliation being sacrificed the common British standard was affirmed. The fashion of the London Estuary dialect (i.e. a mixture of RP and cockney) among Westminster politicians turns this tradition of a common RP standard upside down, as an interdialect effectively wipes out the vital difference between healthy regionalism expressed in an accent and a standard accepted by everybody. Moreover, the speech used by the Political Class shows elements of an alienating, self-interested idiom, consciously distanced from the language of ordinary people, but also from the sober,

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16 Oborne, *The Triumph of the Political Class*, xvii.

17 "Indeed, representative government in Britain has traditionally been conceived, and functioned, as a means of legitimating executive power through the condition of responsiveness." David Judge. *Representation: Theory and Practice in Britain* (Routledge, London, 1999), 14.

18 Oborne, *The Triumph of the Political Class*, 23.

19 Oborne, *The Triumph of the Political Class*, 23-24.

20 Oborne, *The Triumph of the Political Class*, 25.

21 A discussion of the "Establishment" can be found in Jeremy Paxman's book *Friends in High Places: Who Runs Britain?* (London: Penguin, 1991).

22 Oborne, *The Triumph of the Political Class*, 29.

homely speech, typical for the traditions of British politics.[23] As regards *sartorial customs*, one may spot an interesting tension between a "rebellion against established customs" (e.g. wearing a tie) and an "awareness of the need to assert its own authority.[24] The *rites of entry* into the contemporary Political Class include "the ability to show a fairly high level of educational attainment" and demonstrating "the potential to fit into a mainstream business environment."[25] The *leadership style* of this self-interested group has eliminated the reputed stiff upper lip of the Establishment "in favour of a Political Class methodology which favoured display, self-promotion, knowingness and ostentation."[26] For Oborne, this has to do with the legacy of the 1960s "anti-establishmentism". He summarizes the creed of the Political Class as follows:

> *On the progressive wing numerous strands of Marxism, late twentieth-century management theory, Fabianism, and most recently of all a loose doctrine of consumer gratification (an offshoot of the 1960s cult of self-realisation) contend for supremacy. On the right wing elements of free-market liberalism, libertarianism and naked power worship of type usual on the Continental than British right are all to be found. Also present in the mix is a raw populism reminiscent of the totalitarian movements which rose to power in Europe, and never before seen in Britain.*[27]

The public standards of the Political Class differ dramatically from the decency consensus of the former Establishment: shocking stories of the abuse of power, corruption and even sexual transgressions.[28] These events deepen the sense of disparity between public and political standards: in other words, politicians can get away with things impossible in other professions.

Oborne seems to share Hitchens's conviction that although the main political parties proclaim a difference in policies there is, in fact, a great deal of common ground in all of them,[29] especially as regards the inappropriate privileges of the Political Class

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23 Oborne, *The Triumph of the Political Class*, 28. Anthony Sampson, distinguished British journalist, political commentator and author of the survey of British politics *Who Runs This Place? The Anatomy of Britain in the 21st Century* (London: John Murray, 2005), calls this "horror of New Labour English": "The limits of New Labour's reforms were reflected in the language. In opposition New Labour had tried to acquire street-cred with the language of buses or bars [...] But, once in power, the words became more formalised and abstract, limited by political correctness, and transformed into discussions of gender issues, community relations or 'social exclusion'. There were very few of the emotive and earthy words of Old Labour and trades unionists, of workers and bosses, rich and poor. Instead there was the jargon of advertising and management, such as 'enterprise culture', 'human resources' and 'human capital', and verbs which conveyed bold action, to promote, prioritise or deliver." Anthony Sampson, *Who Runs This Place? The Anatomy of Britain in the 21st Century* (London: John Murray, 2005), 83.

24 Oborne, *The Triumph of the Political Class*, 32.

25 Oborne, *The Triumph of the Political Class*, 36-37.

26 Oborne, *The Triumph of the Political Class*, 41.

27 Oborne, *The Triumph of the Political Class*, 45.

28 Perhaps the most incredible of these is the affair of the Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott (b. 1938) and his secretary Tracey Temple, the shocking details of which have been broadly covered in the media, including a TV film on ITV "Confessions of A Diary Secretary" (2007).

29 "British politics has thus avoided the extremes of left and right and involved a limited choice between parties and ideologies generally grouped around the moderate centre of the political spectrum. Despite periods of three or four-party competition, normally two major parties have contended for the support of the mass of the electorate by seeking to occupy the middle ground of politics, roughly in accordance with Downs 'economic theory of democracy' (1957)." Robert Leach, *Political Ideology in Britain* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 227.

as well as the strange cult of "modernising."[30] In fact, this mantra of "modernisation" gives the legitimacy of some of the policies and as such it is excluded from scrutiny and criticism.[31]

Attacking traditional British institutions and the "emasculation of the civil service" Oborne understands as major blows to British democracy. In fact, the civil service ensures the standards of quality and efficiency needed for any government and should, therefore, prepared "to serve all political parties and every political outlook."[32] The author traces the beginnings of this phenomenon to the administration of Margaret Thatcher, whose "charisma" clashed with the sober and sceptical civil servants. She defined the conflicts as follows:

> *There was a clash of cultures between a political leadership fired by an almost Cromwellian impatience with the status quo, and the mandarin world of Whitehall in which scepticism and rumination were more highly rated habits of mind than zeal or blind conviction.*[33]

This approach paved the road to the changes implemented under the Blair administration: civil servants – traditionally bound by their loyalty to the Crown – were now supposed to switch their allegiance to political parties and, indeed, to the culture of the new Political Class. Oborne concludes that the main consequence of this revolution was the shift from a disinterested public service to the logic of a governing clique dominated by media ideologues, e.g. the famous "spin-doctors" Peter Mandelson (b. 1953) and especially Alistair Campbell (b. 1957), who as Director of Communications and Strategy (2000-2003) effectively controlled the official presentation of Downing Street. For Oborne, representative democracy needs a "neutral" public space to check its very representativeness; in other words, if politics is seized by image makers and powerful media ideologues, its very core is rotten.[34]

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30 Sampson points out that for Blair the discourse of "modernising," nominally driven by the effort to give "more power to the people" was in reality accompanied by a widespread centralization of power: "But Blair always wanted clear centralised controls. Before he became prime minister he told the Newspaper Society: 'people have to know that we will run from the centre and govern from the centre'. [...] Once in government, Blair's modernising soon overrode any plans for getting closer to the people. By the end of his first term, he was under fire for becoming a control freak, an obsessive centraliser." Sampson, *Who Runs This Place?*, 84.

31 "This is not just an ideology. It is a kind of social and political theory, even a philosophy, but with a solipsistic conceptual structure that is almost theological or cultic in its capacity to encompass everything or anything the movement might choose to do, while rejecting criticism as a kind of nonsensical heresy." Alan Finlayson, *Making Sense of the New Labour* (London: Lawrence and Wishart Ltd., 2003), 81-82. Alan Finlayson is a Professor of Political and Social Theory at The University of East Anglia. Quoted from Oborne, *The Triumph of the Political Class*, 107.

32 Oborne, *The Triumph of the Political Class*, 133.

33 Peter Ridell and Jill Sherman, "Mandarin from the Treasury plans a small revolution", *The Times,* 1 May 2002, quoted by Oborne, *The Triumph of the Political Class*, 134-5

34 "Political leaders and aspirants certainly appear before the public and make claims about the world and each other. However, the way in which these people are presented, particularly if they are prominent, creates to a remarkable degree and impression that they are in fact characters in a soap opera being played by people of the same name." Bernard Williams, "Truth, Politics and Self-Deception". *Social Research*, 63, 1996 quoted by Oborne, *The Rise of Political Lying*, 129

In that sense, the rise of Alistair Campbell is a clear symptom of this crisis. Oborne's co-authored biography of Campbell[35] captures the rise of the "Media Class,"[36] supposedly carried out in the service of the British Crown.

Politics in the hand of "spin doctors": politicians and the media

Campbell's story is the key "success story" of Blairite Britain, the more so because he was a rather unconventional type to be associated with government. He started a writer of soft pornography, a croupier in a gambling house and a local reporter. In 1984 he began his future spin-doctor career as a press officer for a local Tory politician, Robin Fenner.[37] Oborne pictures Campbell as a prototype of a cynical post-democratic political figure whose motivation to join politics was driven not by any real civil conviction but by an interest in the workings of power:

> Campbell came to politics at a very late age. He did not have a political thought of any consequence whatever until he was approaching the age of thirty [...] His political philosophy was pitiful: a kind of incoherent, inchoate, anti-establishment, half-formed anarchism. This is extraordinary for a man with such an intuitive sense of how power works and which levers need to be pulled.[38]

In fact, once he was introduced to politics and became associated with the then leader of the Labour Party Neil Kinnock (b. 1942),[39] he was able develop his real "talent," that of a media manipulator in the style of tabloid newspapers. Oborne dismisses Campbell's earlier political journalism in the *Daily Mirror*[40] and describes his rise from "a journalist to a propagandist."[41] With the fall of the former Labour MP and media proprietor Robert Maxwell (1923-1991), Campbell rose to prominence in the circles of the Labour Party as a shadow figure and a kingmaker who contributed a great deal to the rise of Tony Blair at the expense of his "deadliest rival" Gordon Brown.[42] Campbell, who learnt "a great deal" from the former Labour spin-doctor Peter Mandelson how to "handle" and "woo" the media,[43] was also the major architect of the "most brilliant election campaign in history"[44] in 1997 which brought Blair to the post of Prime Minister.

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35 See note 2 above.

36 Oborne gives no specific definition for this term, but he seems to be referring generally to those who forge the desired image of politics.

37 Oborne, *Alastair Campbell*, 37.

38 Oborne, *Alastair Campbell*, 49.

39 Lord Kinnock was leader of the Labour Party between 1983 and 1992. The beginnings of the collaboration between Kinnock and Campbell can be dated to the year 1986.

40 "He possesses an unmistakable genius for the compelling tabloid phrase, as he proved years later when he conjured up the memorable 'The People's Princess' in the wake of Princess Diana's death. But he has no real feel for the English language. His range of reference is hopelessly limited. He displays no knowledge of history, ideas of literature. Metaphors are drawn, to a monotonous extent, from the football field. [...] Campbell the writer is most effective when he adopts an idiom, whether it is the arid formulae of tabloid news-reporting or the shrill platitudes of the press release." Oborne, *Alastair Campbell*, 63.

41 Cf. Oborne, *Alastair Campbell*, 63.

42 Oborne, *Alastair Campbell*, 96.

43 Cf. Oborne, *Alastair Campbell*, 126.

44 Cf. Oborne, *Alastair Campbell*, 114 and 122.

Oborne's main concerns with the Campbellian "handling of the media" reflect both the New Labour fascination with tabloid newspapers[45] and the belief in the power of the media to "manage" the truth.[46] The power of "lunches"[47] and other types of shady deals between the media and the politicians prove the sense of alienation of the British political figures from their voters. In fact, the sense for the objective value of truth in politics is the presupposition of a meaningful, and more or less transparent political discourse.[48] Oborne, however, points out the distaste of the Political Class for the "truth," the key asset of what he understands as a decent political culture.[49] This blurring of the sense of right and wrong gives rise to "political lying": if mendacity becomes a matter of course in the "political process", then the basic structures of trust in politics are in jeopardy.[50]

Mendacious reality: the crisis of truth and the rise of political lying

Oborne's analysis of "political lying" sees its roots in the paradoxical convergence of two important, albeit opposing views of the truth: the first is associated with the rise of the religious Right under the administration of G. W. Bush ("our" truth cannot be questioned) and the other has been widespread in the academia in the 1970s and 1980s, namely the postmodern, Foucaultian idea of truth ("truth" as a discourse legitimising specific structures of domination). They "converge around one crucial point of agreement: words like falsehood, accuracy and deception, at any rate as used in ordinary speech, have no validity."[51] In that sense, Blair's administration employed both a "moral," pseudo-religious "authority" argument in his battle for "modern Britain" and for eradicating the "evil" of Saddam Hussein, as well as the postmodern notion that reality is not something that exists objectively "out there," but "something that can be shaped

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45 Among other things, Oborne reports on Blair's instructions to his MPs "to pay 'more attention to the tabloids' He meant the *Sun.*" Oborne, *Alastair Campbell*, 130. In one of his other books, Oborne mentions Labour's unscrupulous acceptance of a donation from Richard Desmond, the publisher of the *Express* who also owns a series of pornographic magazines. See Oborne, *The Rise of Political Lying*, 98.

46 Oborne relates a number of spontaneous, usually rather vulgar statements made by Campbell to the representatives of the press, by which the author documents Campbell's dictatorial, disrespectful handling of the journalists not willing to report what he wanted to communicate to the public, e. g. this statement made to the Sunday lobby in May 1997: "Explain to me just why I should waste my time with a load of f*** wankers like you when you're not going to write anything I tell you anyway." Oborne, *Alastair Campbell*, 187. Mandelson stated the issue thusly: "Of course, we want to use the media, but the media will be our tools, our servants; we are no longer content to let them be our persecutors." Donald McIntyre, *Mandeleson: The Biography.* (London: Harper and Collins, 1999), 87. Quoted from Oborne, *The Rise of Political Lying*, 35.

47 The power of "lunches" between politicians and journalists is vividly described in Peter Hitchens's book *The Cameron Delusion* (London: Continuum, 2010), 9-23. I discuss this topic in my earlier article, "Rage, Delusion and Abolitionism: Contemporary British Society in the Eyes of Peter Hitchens" *American and British Studies Annual* Vol.5 2012, 75.

48 "Government lying amount to a horrifying assault on civil society, the main reason that mendacity is always embedded in totalitarian regimes." Oborne, *The Rise of Political Lying*, 240.

49 "Lying disempowers, and therefore, dehumanises, those who are lied to. Politicians who lie to voters deprive them of the ability to come to a reasonable and well-informed decision how to cast their vote. In so doing, they convert them into dupes." Oborne, *The Rise of Political Lying*, 120.

50 In that way, Oborne reiterates the concerns of other British political commentators on the issue of trust in politics. I am referring e.g. to the following works: Nicholas Jones: *Soundbites and Spin Doctors: How Politicians Manipulate the Media – and Vice Versa* (London: Orion, 1996), Clare Short: *An Honourable Deception?: New Labour, Iraq and the Misuse of Power* (London: The Free Press, 2004), and especially the work of the Cambridge Professor of Philosophy, Onora O'Neill: *A Question of Trust* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002).

51 Oborne, *The Rise of Political Lying*, 139.

and used as part of the battle for power."[52] This idea of reality is thus driven by the language of "inevitable" modernising, as well as by the unscrupulous production and re-production of the truth.

Oborne is aware of the fact that this phenomenon has by now become fairly widespread in the Western world, however, in Britain, traditionally it encountered a number of difficulties. His conservative view of the U.K. emphasises "institutional conservatism," i.e. the British sober, sceptical and rather critical attitude to major social and institutional upheavals, as well as the capital of trust towards its politicians.[53] Similarly to his analysis of the Political Class, he points out the difference between the "idea of Britain" as a democratic state and the Machiavellian tradition of making lies into a political tool.[54] The "success" of New Labour in disseminating the culture of "political lying" is thus to be measured not in relation to the former, i.e. to the "magnificent tradition of public integrity and civic engagement"[55] which Oborne repeatedly associates with the Gladstonian concept of politics in the Victorian period, but with the continental traditions of "wealth, intrigue and intimidation."[56]

Oborne essentially distinguishes five different ways of "being economical with the truth" under Blair: *reinventing the past*, *direct lies*, *different truths for different people*,[57] *clear manipulations* (especially with statistics)[58] and *inventing the truth* to suit the programme[59]: the lies and half-truths cover a vast range of issues from minor deceptions about embarrassing things from the past (e.g. Blair's membership in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in the 1980s) to the shady background surrounding the plotting and execution of the "disastrous" war in Iraq.[60] This habit of shameless, unscrupulous lying, however, destroys much more than just the "public truth": Oborne quotes Václav Havel and points out the rampant use of lying in totalitarian regimes.[61] In this sense, it endangers the very principles of British democracy:

> Over the past few years new Labour has smashed the established dividing line between truth and falsehood, and put another in its place. Peter Mandelson and Alastair Campbell, Tony Blair's two propaganda chiefs, have converted truth into an instrument of power. They have privatised the truth, rather as the Conservative Party took the utilities, telecoms and rail industries out of public ownership in the 1980s and 1990s. In an act of grand larceny, truth and falsehood have been removed from the public sphere, and put to the particular use of New Labour. The motive may well have been virtuous, but the consequences are hateful. Attempts to appropriate the truth are always very dangerous. Governing parties from time to time make these claims to ownership of the truth. Historical precedent shows they can be a prelude to an assault on the freedoms of the citizen, the rule of law, and political stability.[62]

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52 Oborne, *The Rise of Political Lying*, 141.

53 Cf. Oborne, *The Rise of Political Lying*, 33.

54 Cf. Oborne, *The Rise of Political Lying*, 228.

55 Oborne, *The Rise of Political Lying*, 264.

56 Cf. Roger Scruton, *England: an Elegy*, 192. Scruton is quoted in note 14.

57 Oborne, *The Rise of Political Lying*, 91-110.

58 Oborne, *The Rise of Political Lying*, 56-62.

59 Oborne, *The Rise of Political Lying*, 66-90.

60 Oborne, *The Rise of Political Lying*, 184-218.

61 Oborne, *The Rise of Political Lying*, 6.

62 Oborne, *The Rise of Political Lying*, 244-245.

Oborne's concern with the slow undoing of British political culture describes a full circle: his vision of Blairism corresponds to Colin Crouche's notion of "post-democracy,"[63] i.e., manipulative populism producing a disenfranchised electorate stemming from an understanding of politics not in moral, but technical terms.[64] This includes sophisticated forms of "responding" to the wishes of the public (e.g. through the concept of triangulation[65] and the use of "Voter Vault"[66] software for dealing with undecided voters), "handling" the truth and the transformation of reality to suit different interests and the effective triumph of the political over everything else.

Conclusion: beyond the political

Oborne's gloomy vision of British politics under Blair tends to transcend practical issues of democracy and deal with wider social and cultural contexts within British culture. Indeed, the traditional values associated with British society – particularly liberty, tolerance and fairness – had existed long before any political programme was drafted; these notions created the basic tissue of "Britishness" as we now know it. Liberty for Oborne is in fact the key prerequisite for acting politically, i.e., for materializing pre-political values in the public arena, as politics itself cannot guarantee them.[67] Thus it follows that politics can never claim supremacy over other fields of human activity, or, indeed, become the ultimate determiner of right and wrong. And this, Oborne fears, happened under Tony Blair:

> *The Political Class believes that all values are based in the political sphere. This insistence on the primacy of the political is dangerous. It is complacent, and factually wrong, to assume that democracy is the same as liberty, tolerance and fairness. The principle of liberty and tolerance was embedded in the British constitution long before universal suffrage and the emergence of what we think of today as democracy.*[68]

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63 Cf. his pamphlet *Coping With Post-Democracy*. Available at http://www.fabians.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Post-Democracy.pdf (Accessed May 15, 2015).

64 "If we have only two concepts - democracy and un-democracy - we cannot take discussion about the health of democracy very far. The idea of post-democracy helps us describe situations when boredom, frustration and disillusion have settled in after a democratic moment; when powerful minority interests have become far more active than the mass of ordinary people in making the political system work for them; where political elites have learned to manage and manipulate popular demands; where people have to be persuaded to vote by top-down publicity campaigns. This is not the same as non-democracy, but describes a period in which we have, as it were, come out the other side of the parabola of democracy. There are many symptoms that this is occurring in contemporary Britain and other advanced societies, constituting that we are indeed moving further away from the maximal ideal of democracy towards the postdemocratic model." Crouch, *Coping With Post Democracy*, 7.

65 "Triangulation" refers to the "idea that political leaders must occupy political territory in order to deny space to opponents." Oborne, *The Triumph of the Political Class*, 328.

66 Voter Vault software technology was first used by the US Republican Party to compile a database consisting of "a warehouse of Voter Data, preferences, affiliations and a lot of demographic data that the Republican Party uses for its analyses before planning election campaign strategy." Daniel Tynan, "GOP Voter Vault Shipped Overseas." Accessed May 15, 2015. http://www.pcworld.com/article/117930/article.html.

67 I am alluding here to the famous paradox of Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde that liberal democracies live by certain prerequisites they themselves cannot guarantee. Cf. Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, *Staat, Gesellschaft, Freiheit: Studien zur Staatstheorie und zum Verfassungsrecht*. (Frankfurt a.M: Suhrkamp, 1976), 60.

68 Oborne, *The Triumph of the Political Class*, 328.

Oborne, therefore, advocates traditional British institutions and a British sense of individual responsibility over the cult of "modernising" which dominates the discourse of what he calls "Political Class." By affirming these traditional values, he seeks to reclaim the British tradition of "public integrity and civic engagement" which revives the notion of "honourable service" to the public good through a sober and down-to-earth handling of facts. To him, that is the only antidote to the widespread alienation and disgust:

> [...] what Britain really needs is not just a change in the law, but a change of heart. We face a choice. We can do nothing, and carry on cheating, and deceiving each other, and wait for the public anger, alienation and disgust that will follow. We can watch the gradual debasement of decent democratic politics, and the rapid rise of shysters and the frauds and – before very long perhaps – something nastier by far. Or we can try and act once more as moral human beings. It's a common effort. It affects us all, politicians, journalists, citizens. But there is hope. Britain has a magnificent tradition of public integrity and civic engagement, which can all be reclaimed. It could even be better than before.[69]

Politics done in the right way presupposes a very high degree of moral awareness. Oborne's concern with the shape of British politics thus reminds us of the traditions that have made Britain a very special place in terms of political culture. Oborne's analysis of Blairism is an important contribution to the debate about the nature of British political practice and about the future of traditional British values.

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69 Oborne, *The Rise of Political Lying*, 328.

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