1 Britain in the Eighties

There is no such thing as society, only individual men and women and their families.

Margaret Thatcher, 1983

An era of unprecedented uncertainty . . . shuffle for shuffle’s sake

Tom Peters, *Thriving on Chaos*, 1987

Uniformity has given way to broader choices . . . Mass markets have splintered. Size has lost its significance as it becomes increasingly clear that a company’s rank in the Fortune 500 is of limited importance.

Martin Davis, Chairman, Gulf + Western, *Fortune*, December 1985

What was it about the social and political climate of the 1980s which rendered it so susceptible to familial ideology? One hundred, perhaps even fifty, years ago, one could safely anticipate living in a world that would look and function roughly like that of one’s mother, if not one’s grandmother. During the latter part of this century, that certainty changed but perhaps most quickly and radically, in the eighties. It was a period of great sociocultural dislocation and upheaval.¹ Drawing on a Barthesian concept of myth, we can see how contemporary mythologies functioned to explain and resolve change and paradox; social phenomena which were, in reality, insoluble.² In the eighties, such myths depended for their anchorage on the ideology of the family. While the family is a material entity meeting real people’s needs, it also meets needs which are socially and culturally constructed. The family annealed the gap between social crisis and political mythology, mythologies which were in themselves riven by contradiction. This chapter examines the historically specific nature of these turmoils and the myths in circulation.

CRISIS AND THE POLITICAL AGENDA

Britain and America have always enjoyed a close, if turbulent, relationship from the time of the early pioneers through to the contemporary ‘favoured nation’ status. However, the eighties represented a time when political and social events brought the two nations into greater proximity and symmetry than for very many years. Elected Prime Minister in 1979, Margaret Thatcher gave her name to a political ideology which wedded the
individualist politics of the American Dream to British neo-monetarism. A historical moment combined with a powerful personality to give focus to a radical right politics which looked very different from the Labour–Conservative consensus of the postwar period. ‘Thatcherism’ looked to America rather than to Europe in the enterprise of ‘making Britain great again’ and the ‘special relationship’ between Mrs Thatcher and Ronald Reagan was explicitly and publicly cultivated. During this period in particular, the political and social concerns of the USA and Britain were perceived to be almost identical, mobilised through the intimate relationship played out around the heads of government. The old certainties of consensus government, state intervention and international alliance against a common enemy began to fall apart. In addition, solid manufacturing bases, which had once led industrial revolutions across the world, became vulnerable to foreign competition. Countries once dismissed as ‘Third World’, such as Taiwan, Malaysia and Hong Kong, competed aggressively in a global marketplace very different from the ones western countries were accustomed to. New commodity forms, particularly information, and the technologies created to circulate it, seized strong positions in commercial traffic. In the process, the bourgeois, humanist values of America and Britain were challenged. The cost of labour had been steadily driven up in the western world as welfare systems developed and individuals were protected from absolute hardship. Developing countries with little allegiance to such values began to compete in capitalist markets in which, ironically, traditional capital-rich nations had disadvantaged themselves. Ideological conflicts were inevitable in such a climate. Torn between loyalty to long-held beliefs in individual rights and the need to reverse economic decline, both America and Britain embraced a radical political agenda which incorporated and rehearsed these insoluble dilemmas.

This political agenda was itself highly paradoxical. It took the form of a reactionary utopianism driven by leaders who were innate pragmatists. Rejecting the current reality as unsatisfactory, it proposed the reconstruction of a golden era which, in reality, had never existed and never could. This vision was based on a version of the American Dream in which just by working hard enough and observing moral conventions based on nation and family, individuals would succeed. Thus, in perfect circularity, the vision looked both forwards and backwards, relying for its justification on a mythical past. In both countries, familial ideology lay at the heart of contemporary political rhetoric. There were, of course, key differences in the political maps each country followed. In America, for example, the church was a major player in carving out the political scene, while in Britain the state and the church diverged more sharply than ever before.