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## *Introduction [Cultures of Post-War British Fascism]*

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## Introduction

*Nigel Copsey and John E. Richardson*

Cultural interventions have been a recurring feature of fascist parties and movements in Britain, just as they have been elsewhere, whether in continental Europe or further afield. Unquestionably, culture was, and remains, central to the fascist dystopian project. Indeed we might argue that ‘cultural struggle’ – in support of national and cultural ‘regeneration’ purged of the ‘degeneracy’ of liberalism – has been at the very heart of all varieties of British fascism. This is no less true for fascisms before the Second World War as for fascisms after it. To their credit, in reading British fascism as a cultural phenomenon, historians have started to chart the cultural visions and cultural outputs of British fascists during the inter-war period (see Gottlieb and Linehan, eds., 2004). However, the cultural landscapes of post-war British fascism have yet to be examined in any detail. The aim of this present volume is to map these cultural landscapes, identifying major contours (or layers) as reflected in the ideas, behaviour, literature, music, dress, and discourse of British post-war fascism.

Needless to say, the term ‘culture’, like ‘fascism’, is highly contested. However, this is no place for lengthy theoretical discussions. Our understanding of ‘culture’ is that it manifests itself at various levels: in terms of core ideas, values, and beliefs; in terms of group behaviour(s); and in terms of objects or ‘artefacts’, such as texts,

literature, dress-codes, and music. We are also drawn to interactions between far-right cultures and mainstream popular culture, and so extend the analysis beyond cultures of fascist self-representation. Neither is this the place to dwell on scholarly definitions of fascism. In the spirit of scholarly pluralism, the editors have desisted from imposing standardised definitions. This might invite some criticism but all contributors to this volume accept that (British) fascism has continued to exist after 1945; that some forms of the contemporary extreme right can be considered fascist (or neo-fascist); and that because fascism views itself as a cultural movement it can be (productively) approached in those terms. For as George Mosse (1999: x) recognised, it is only through a cultural interpretation of fascism that we can come to understand the movement 'from the inside out'.

This present volume builds upon Gottlieb and Linehan's splendid collection of essays - *The Culture of Fascism: Visions of the Far Right in Britain* - published in 2004. Taking its cue from the 'cultural turn' in generic fascist studies, Gottlieb and Linehan's innovative volume departed from the well-trodden path and opened up new possibilities for research. As Colin Holmes (2005: 1462) observed in his review of their volume:

The history of British fascism travelled for many years along a predictable route, focusing during its journey on a number of key sites. The career of Oswald Mosley, the bizarre worlds inhabited by Arnold Leese, fascist activities in East London which were often linked to anti-Semitism, levels of membership in the BUF, and, invariably, fascism's failure to capture political power are among the leading contours that have captured attention. Now excursions are being made into territory which extends our understanding of Britain's fascist past. The *Culture of Fascism* forms part of this new enterprise.

Gottlieb and Linehan's introduction rightly pointed out that British fascists 'developed an extensive and, more often than not, coherent cultural package' (2004: 3). All this stemmed from a basic view that fascists everywhere shared: that the culture of modern liberal society was profoundly 'decadent' and 'degenerate'.

For over a decade Gottlieb and Linehan's collection has held its place as the major cultural history of British fascism. Yet even when setting a new research agenda for British fascist studies, it had an obvious limitation: it focused almost exclusively on the inter-war period. When the post-war period came in for consideration, coverage was limited to just two chapters. The first of these chapters consisted of an intellectual history of race, culture and evolution that spanned the twentieth century (Thurlow, 2004); the second offered an historical overview of representations of cultural decadence in post-1945 fascist ideology (Woodbridge, 2004). To date there has been no follow up volume exploring the much neglected post-war period. Accordingly, this present volume positions itself as the successor volume to Gottlieb and Linehan's 2004 collection.

The expanding literature on Britain's right-wing extremist tradition, which testifies to the continuing academic and popular interest in British fascism, has already told us much. Recent publications, such as those by Copsey (2008), Copsey and Macklin (2011), Goodwin (2011), and Trilling (2012) have brought the narrative behind the rise (and fall) of the British National Party (BNP) up to date. Promising to advance our knowledge further still is a number of newer publications arriving in the field, such as John Richardson on discourses of British fascism (2015); Joel Busher on the English Defence League (2014); and Graham Macklin on the history of white racial

nationalism in Britain (2015). Nonetheless a space on the shelves for a cultural history of post-war British fascism remains.

As Gottlieb and Linehan also remarked in their 2004 introduction, British fascism has 'often been a reflector and recycler of wider cultural phenomena, and in grudging dialogue with current cultural discourses' (2004: 2). If this was true for the 1920s and 1930s, it is just as true for the period after 1945 to the present day. Indeed, it could be argued that Britain was reshaped by far greater cultural change after 1945 than in the decades before. Prior to 1945 Britain was overwhelming white and nominally Christian, whereas after 1945 Britain was transformed into a multi-cultural society. Britons have witnessed the rise of youth culture and a media revolution, de-Christianisation, female liberation, the fragmentation of Britain, increasing European integration, and globalisation. Important questions remain unanswered: how far has post-war British fascism responded to profound cultural change? In what ways has contemporary British fascism absorbed cultural change and reconfigured its own cultural production and self-representation? What of new forms of far-right cultural praxis? And what are we make of the relationship between post-war British fascism and popular culture? Drawing together the diverse scholarship of a range of specialists, this volume seeks to address such questions.

The theme of cultural 'regeneration' serves as the point of departure for this present volume. During the inter-war years Mosley and the British Union of Fascists (BUF) had taken their intellectual inspiration from Nietzsche, Bergson, Sorel, Le Bon but above all Spengler. Applying Spengler's prognostications on the decline of Western Civilisation, the BUF proclaimed that Britain was not just ailing but *terminally* ill, unless, of course, it could be restored to health by the (euphemistically

labelled) 'regenerative' forces of fascism. Concentrating on Mosley and his post-war Union Movement, Janet Dack's opening chapter explores continuities and changes in post-1945 fascist attitudes, and her concern, in particular, is the extent to which the original Spenglerian vision was adapted in order to accommodate a radically changing world – the rise of youth culture, for example - alongside Mosley's new-found focus on 'Europe a Nation'.

History - a sense of the past, and assertions that certain events in Britain's unique story have made us who we are today - has often been at the heart of fascist cultural output. Our second chapter, by Steve Woodbridge, examines how cultural 'heritage' and 'history' have played significant roles in efforts by the extreme right to 'inform and educate' supporters about what they claim is a distinctive British national identity. BNP founder John Tyndall's political ideas, for example, were underpinned by a systematic cultural reading of history, and this was repeated by other BNP writers, including more recently in Griffin's 'modernised' BNP. Extreme-right cultural magazines and texts have regularly carried articles on the 'great' heroes or events of the past, and there has often been an emphasis on historical tradition and 'authenticity'. This chapter reveals that conflict over the interpretation of 'history' has been an important ideological battleground for the post-war fascist right.

In some areas of fascist life and culture, the spatial component is obvious. Space has been physically fought over in the streets when fascists have engaged anti-fascist activists for the 'right' to stage their particular brand of political theatre, or to traverse particular streets or routes deemed to have some symbolic value for fascist identity. If this was the case during the 1930s (see Linehan, 2012) it has also been true after 1945, particularly during the phase of National Front activity and growth in the

1970s. Thomas Linehan's chapter scrutinises these overt street-based struggles, and in so doing considers the way that fascist spatial practices sacralised particular spaces in the struggle to appropriate the streets for fascism. As Linehan reveals, this spatial component was evident in other areas of post-war fascist life and culture too (such as fascist ideological readings of race). As well as competing for physical space with political rivals, the National Front also had to contend with the dominant mainstream space of the 'Establishment'.

British fascism has long been associated with cultures of masculinity, whether in the BUF, the NF or the BNP. This association has been questioned (see Durham, *Women and Fascism*, 1998) and in light of earlier arguments Martin Durham's chapter interrogates more recent developments in the BNP, where Nick Griffin has projected his 'ethno-nationalist' party as both family and female-friendly. When it comes to gender, asks Durham, is it the case that the culture of the 'modernised' BNP is fundamentally different to that of the 1970s NF or Tyndall's BNP? Whilst calling our attention to newer developments, such as the mobilisation of gender in its war against Islam, Durham remains unconvinced by the extent of the BNP's 'feminisation'. As a final point, Durham proposes taking the argument in a new direction: when considering the *extended* experience of women and the extreme right we should also consider organisations such as British Housewives' League, set up in the aftermath of the Second World War. Despite close links to an anti-Semitic far-right organisation, its female culture was very different to that of the NF or BNP.

The subject of Paul Jackson's chapter is the neo-Nazi fiction of Britain's neo-Nazi 'godfather', Colin Jordan. Notorious neo-Nazi publicist, and leader of the 1950s White Defence League, the 1960s National Socialist Movement, and later the British

Movement, Jordan is less well known as the author of fiction prose. Taking inspiration from the US neo-Nazi William Pearce's *The Turner Diaries*, Jordan turned to fiction in order to articulate not only his dystopian vision of multi-cultural decline but also the need for violent racial revolution. Whilst Jordan's trashy novellas – *Merrie England - 2000*, and *The Uprising* lack any literary merit, they do reprise key far-right tropes such as conspiracy theory, Holocaust denial, racism, revolutionary justice and violence. Jackson develops the theme of 'licence' in his chapter, highlighting how these fictional texts offer sympathetic readers the licence to both entertain extremist views and to act upon these extreme views, violently if need be.

Fiction also looms large in Nigel Copsey's chapter. Copsey's interest lies not in the cultural output of post-war fascists like Colin Jordan but in representations of post-war British fascism within popular culture. Our attention is called first to representations in young adult fiction, before moving on to political theatre, and then fictional representations on screen. There is, Copsey suggests, a propensity to dismiss home-grown fascism as something set apart from the mainstream, lacking in any seriousness or significance. However, rather than being ignored by the cultural mainstream, at various moments British post-war fascism has elicited a series of fictional responses that have been overwhelmingly hostile, and at times brutally honest. What is important to bear in mind, Copsey argues, is that these cultural representations not only *reflected* contemporary social attitudes but also played a significant role in the *production* of societal knowledge about the far right.

In the 1930s, the most obvious sartorial indicator of the British fascist was the black shirt, 'an eloquent symbol of a time, an ideology, and a movement' (Coupland, 2004: 115). These days, the clichéd fascist uniform is the swastika-adorned 'skinhead

look', evolving from a working-class youth subculture that first emerged in Britain in the late 1960s and early 1970s. But, as Emily Tuner-Graham's chapter confirms, the far right has moved with the fashion. Whilst 'White power' skinheads might retain a street presence elsewhere, particularly so in countries such as Germany (although even here a new generation is ditching the bomber jacket and leather boots), in Britain – homeland of the skinhead – the far right has adopted more mainstream signifiers in relation to its dress-codes, not least the 'Casual' look favoured by football hooligans. For Turner-Graham, this is deliberate: to 'blend' extreme-right ideas in with the more mainstream milieu. If anything, the dominant sartorial trend is towards the bland, the benign and even the anonymous.

This trend, a move away from obvious neo-Nazi associations, has also been reflected in music, as British fascists have endeavoured to distance themselves from violent neo-Nazi subcultures. In Ryan Shaffer's chapter, developments in fascist music are traced from the hey-day of 'White power' skinhead music in the 1980s through to more recent attempts by the BNP to co-opt traditional and more 'benign' English folk music. For Shaffer, music can serve as a map of how Britain's post-war fascists have viewed themselves and have projected their identity to others. However, messages have not always been consistent and cultural constructions of identity through this music have fluctuated between themes of Britishness, Europeaness and whiteness. Likewise, Karl Spracklen's chapter also concerns developments in music. Spracklen's chapter responds to attempts by far-right activists to infiltrate and co-opt two particular music scenes: black metal and English folk. He examines debates relating to boundaries, belonging and exclusion in these two scenes. Spracklen argues that both scenes have resisted far right intervention through their policing of boundaries and

communicative choices. Nonetheless, both scenes remain compromised by their relationships to myths of whiteness.

In our penultimate chapter, Graham Macklin acquaints us with the esoteric world of Britain's meta-political far right. The focus is on its principal ideological vehicle: the 'New Right', founded in 2005 by Troy Southgate, a former National Front 'political soldier' whose ideological odyssey has seen his metamorphosis from 'political activist' to 'cultural and intellectual agitator'. For Macklin, meetings of the New Right provide a unique insight into the contemporary far right's intellectual cultural milieu. According to Macklin, what these meetings reveal is that whilst the British version of the New Right might share some similarities with the European New Right (see Bar-On, 2007), it is influenced more by the esoteric, metaphysical, occult, and extreme-right themes (anti-Semitism, 'revisionism' and Holocaust denial) of its founders and members. In this sense it is recognisably more 'British' than 'European'.

A cultural struggle continues to lie at the heart of the political project of the BNP, and as part of this struggle, party officials and activists rail against cultural (and artistic) outputs that they feel exemplify the degeneracy of liberal society. In some ways this preoccupation reflects a cultural shift in campaign strategies of British fascists – away from traditional political activism towards something less quantifiable: a politics of cultural engagement. In our final chapter John Richardson examines the ways that the BNP position objectionable cultural outputs as epiphenomenal to wider social and cultural processes underlying post-war liberal society. Central to their argumentation is the notion of 'Cultural-Marxism', its relation to political correctness, and wider (racialised) conspiracies purportedly intended to weaken race and nation. This chapter argues that such a *Weltanschauung* is not unique to British fascist

activism, being shared by a range of individuals and groups based across Europe and the United States (most recently exemplified in the ‘manifesto’ of Anders Behring Breivik). Our analysis of British fascist culture therefore needs to be mindful of discourses of fascist fellow travellers, given the ways that they cross-fertilise and learn from each other.

The origins of this volume go back to a discussion between the editors in 2011. A workshop was held at Newcastle University in 2012, where invited contributors were able to ‘road-test’ their ideas. The distance between the original conception of the project, workshop, and the publication of this volume was much further than we had originally anticipated. So we would like to express our thanks to the contributors for their patience, and also to thank those contributors who we approached after the workshop and delivered chapters at shorter notice. Finally, we would like to dedicate this book to Dr Martin Durham in recognition of his longstanding contribution to the academic study of Britain’s far right. It is our hope that this book represents a fitting tribute to him and his work, in that it significantly advances understanding of the multifaceted culture(s) of post-war British fascism.

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