Review Essay

Britain’s Contemporary Extreme Right in Context

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The scholarly literature on British fascism is not lacking in research monographs and edited collections examining every aspect of the subject—history, ideology, leaders, organisational developments, electoral support, discourse, social movements, subcultures, and transnational links.¹ What has been missing until recently has been a more basic introduction aimed at readers, not steeped in the literature. The two titles under consideration here both draw on that rich seam of scholarship but are deliberately written to appeal to a non-specialist audience.

Professor Paul Jackson’s book is aimed at a student audience while Sam Moore and Alex Robert’s book is pitched more at anti-fascists and activists. Jackson’s book seeks to locate the contemporary British far right within its historical context while Moore and Roberts’s book aims to situate it within recent developments in the digital space and delineate how these interact with, and influence, offline social activism. So while both books do not possess the archival depth and scholarly insights of works by the likes of Nigel Copsey, Stephen Dorril, Graham Macklin, and Richard Thurlow, or develop an innovative framework for understanding British fascism based on social psychology or discourse analysis like Michael Billig or John Richardson, they stand on their own merits and should be judged by what they are trying to achieve as introductions and overviews rather than as research monographs.

_Pride in Prejudice_ consists of an introduction and concluding chapter with nine substantive chapters in between. In the introduction, the author makes clear his intentions for the book ‘which has been written as a primer to the academic analysis on the extreme right for those who want to know more’ (p. 9). In keeping with the book’s pedagogic intent, the first three chapters are historical and chronological, focusing on the 1930s, the postwar fascist revival, and the modernisation of the extreme right in the internet era. The remaining chapters are thematic, looking at such issues as leadership, support, gender, online activism, violence, and responses to the far right from state and non-state actors. There are also useful appendices with a list of prominent far-right activists and a glossary of terms, both of which will be helpful _aides-memoires_ for newcomers to this area.

The historical chapters trace an established narrative looking at the main political parties of the British fascist tradition including the British Union of Fascists, the postwar Mosleyite Union Movement, the National Front, and finally the British National Party (_bnp_) which became the most successful ever extreme-right electoral force in the UK in the early 2000s. This is all very familiar territory to scholars working in the area. But the thematic chapters are more interesting. Jackson adeptly uses them to interrogate different aspects of the postwar extreme right which he correctly identifies, following experts such as

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Roger Griffin and Graham Macklin, as being ‘groupuscular’ in nature. ‘For historians who study comparative fascism . . . these small organisations are seen as the most typical manifestation of fascist activism’ (p. 194). The groupuscular focus allows the author’s organisational viewfinder to roam more broadly.

He examines a wide range of social movements and groupuscules, from the comparatively well-known such as Blood & Honour, Combat 18, and the English Defence League (EDL) to more obscure outfits like Britain First, Feuerkrieg Division, National Action, Patriotic Alternative, and the Traditional Britain Group. As the author correctly argues, this also more accurately reflects the British extreme right in the twenty-first century which is a network of fissiparous political sects and tribes rather than a movement dominated by a monolithic political party. It is also indicative of the ideological heterogeneity of Britain’s contemporary extreme right.

The chapter on gendered activism is an important addition and provides a much-needed corrective to some scholarship which has underplayed the significance of female activists and gender issues within the extreme-right milieu. On the other hand, more unpacking of the extreme-right’s long tradition of anti-abortion activism would have been welcome, as well as more information on the increasing salience of transphobia as a mobilising passion and gateway into extreme-right activism and the wider ‘incel’ subculture.

One of the book’s strongest sections is its exploration of leadership, which examines this in relation to both party leaders and ideologues. There is insightful investigation of the ‘coterie charisma’ suggested by Roger Eatwell which allows leading activists to receive adulation within extreme-right subcultures, even if this appeal fails to resonate with the wider public. This dynamic contributes to leading activists staying within the movement and the historical continuities in personnel and ideology which Jackson is rightly keen to emphasise.

The material on fascist violence is also apposite and prescient although the reliance on news sources reveals that more scholarly work needs to be done on this topic. The chapter on online activism is an effective account of the history and capacity of extreme-right groups to adapt swiftly to new technologies to propagate, recruit, radicalise and influence. Yet the chapter would have been enhanced with more content on the extreme-right alternative media ecosystem. Although there is consideration of the ‘mainstreaming’ of the far right—particularly in the section on the BNP—a deeper examination of this phenomenon would have been useful. The role and influence of Enoch Powell is underplayed in the history and the ideological and policy crossover between the mainstream conservative right and the extreme right could have been more profitably explored.
This reviewer also found the section on anti-fascism a little bland, superficial, and thinly sourced. This could have been an opportunity to introduce some primary source material to enliven the narrative rather than relying yet again on summarising the secondary literature. One final negative note. For a book published by a reputable university press, there are an unfortunate number of misspellings, typos, and inaccuracies. Hopefully these errors can be corrected by the publisher in future reprints. Despite these minor irritations, there is still much to recommend Jackson's book. It largely succeeds in its aims of providing a concise introduction to why we should take the extreme right seriously. It delivers a decent potted history of the organisational and ideological peregrinations of the extreme right. Established researchers and scholars will not find anything that is new here, but they are not the target audience. For students and the general reader, this is a commendably clear, readable, and helpful introduction to its subject, as well as to the wider academic literature on the topic.

12 Rules for What is an anti-fascist podcast originally hosted by Sam Moore and Alex Roberts. *Post-Internet Far Right* emerged from discussions on the podcast with academics and activists. While the book is addressed explicitly at times to anti-fascists, its arguments develop from a deep-seated engagement with both contemporary far-right digital activism and some of the existing scholarly and theoretical literature. The book is structured around a series of thematic chapters which have a certain logical progression beginning with the subjectivity of ‘fascist feelings’ and ending in the objective opposition of ‘contemporary anti-fascism’. The short chapters in between examine a fascinating panoply of significant themes including metapolitics and aesthetics, conspiracy theories, influencers (and the ‘swarms’ they influence), right-wing intellectuals, the street, new organisational forms, violence, and ecofascism.

The authors’ laudable intent is to move analysis of the contemporary far right away from traditional stereotypes of mass parties and Nazi skinheads as ‘The types of far-right thought and action developing in the wake of the Internet are much more varied and complex than these labels seem to indicate’ (pp. 9–10). The authors demonstrate a good awareness of the breadth of the far right, ‘we distinguish between conservatism, reactionary politics, and fascism’ (p. 19), although they are also aware that the boundaries between these are often fluid. In addition, although the book is largely focused on the UK context, it also insightfully discusses international influences from the American alt-right and violent neo-Nazis like Atomwaffen Division and The Base to the European New Right and Identitarian movement.

The book’s greatest strength is in scoping out the changes to the organisational structure of the far right in the digital era and what the implications
of this are. People attracted to far-right activism once joined political parties that tended to be bureaucratic and hierarchical with their local and regional branches, national committees, party officials, and leaders. Ideology and policy were tightly controlled by the leadership and dispensed to the ranks and file. Nowadays participants instead become part of an engaged online audience who actively consume content—or the ‘swarm’, as the authors creatively term it—and leading activists who would once have been party officials are now instead ‘influencers’ with large followings on social media. Influencers in turn can ‘operationalise’ the swarm to become active offline where control of the streets remains a perennial far-right concern. This was evidenced in the UK by the large street protests mostly organised online by football hooligan gangs in support of former EDL leader ‘Tommy Robinson’ (pp. 126–127).

But as the authors explore, there are problems for far-right groups whose primary activity is online in translating this into offline activism. The anonymity of the Internet is obviously not present offline and anti-fascists have a long track record of exposing and identifying far-right activists taking part in public demonstrations. The social consequences of public exposure can still be high. This has affected the ability of far-right groups such as Generation Identity and Patriotic Alternative to grow in the UK (pp. 150–151). These groups have publicly disavowed Nazism, but their leading activists emerged from the Neo-Nazi milieu, and despite some high-profile publicity stunts, these organisations face the perennial far-right challenge of maintaining a balance between the radicalising tendencies of some of their activists and the need to present a more ‘moderate’ face to the wider public and media.

Far-right groups also face competition from those even further to the right—the ‘Blackpilled’ violence-venerating accelerationists who share the longstanding fascist desire for a total societal destruction where decadence can be purged so that a new ‘racially pure’ ethnostate can be reborn from the ashes. This deadly violence and its overlap with ecofascism are the focus of the book’s final chapters. This process of ‘extremification’, as the authors term, it is a symptom of online activism. As extremists are banned from more mainstream platforms and regroup in more obscure underground far-right digital spaces, only the most extreme activists remain committed to the cause (p. 170). In describing this process, the book would have been strengthened by engaging with the extensive scholarly literature on radicalisation and de-radicalisation.

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The authors provide a useful short guide to the influences on far-right violence from well-known written sources such as *The Turner Diaries* and *Siege* to murky online spaces like 4Chan and 8Chan which have been used to plan, script, and celebrate far-right violence and terrorism. They are also almost certainly correct in outlining the opportunities for further far-right organising and violence as the climate crisis deepens. The final chapter (before a postscript on the 6 January 2021 attack on the Capitol Building) outlines an anti-fascist response to the preceding description of the far-right digital and political landscape. It must be said that the suggestions are all fairly obvious and anodyne: research, de-platforming, street opposition, deradicalisation, building a broader anti-fascist culture and uniting with others on the left in action on climate change. The authors are perhaps correct in suggesting that the anti-fascist movement itself needs to find its own tactics and solutions.

*Post-Internet Far Right* works effectively as a short, and very nicely illustrated, primer on the changes in far-right organising over the past decade and will be of particular interest to its target audience of activists. Scholars and researchers will also find some of its insights and conceptual innovations to be stimulating and worthwhile.