

# REACTION OR REVOLUTION? EARLY INTERWAR ASSESSMENTS OF THE NATURE OF BRITISH FASCISM IN THE 1920S

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*This article explores responses to the emergence of fascism in Britain during the early 1920s. It surveys the general assessments of the nature of both Italian Fascism and the British model put forward by politicians and other commentators in the United Kingdom, together with how the early British fascists themselves viewed their creed. Using the concepts of reaction and revolution, the article points out how fascism was sometimes portrayed as 'reactionary' by both its opponents and proponents, and sometimes as 'revolutionary' by both its critics and ideologues. Indeed, some fascist ideologues could accommodate and synthesise both stances, which suggests that fascism - at times - embodied what some historians have termed as "reactionary modernism".*

How did political commentators and other writers on contemporary affairs view the early manifestations of fascism in Britain? And how did some of the fascists themselves respond to the initial criticisms levelled at their creed?

Although various political observers and newspaper journalists in the country took a close interest in the general nature of Italian Fascism during the early interwar period, especially in how the new political phenomenon was evolving in its birthplace, there was still relatively little serious analytical material published on the early British variant.

The bulk of the published information on Britain's fascists during these early years came mainly in the form of instantaneous daily newspaper coverage and swift editorial comment, hastily put together in response to the latest newsworthy events, especially in relation to revelations and activities connected to Italy or to European fascism more generally. A combination of admiration, revulsion or ambivalent fascination, together with occasional explicit ideological comment, regularly shaped much of this early writing.

Moreover, possibly as a result of fascism's reputation at the time as a predominantly anti-intellectual creed, there was scant academic analysis of the extreme Right.

As a movement of the 'Right', fascism was mainly opposed by writers and critics on the centre-Left and far Left of the British political spectrum, ranging from the Liberal and Labour parties and the trade union movement, through to the Communist party and other smaller revolutionary Leftwing groups. Much of this commentary was strongly shaped by pragmatic immediacy and an ardent concern to encourage and mobilize anti-fascist mass action on the streets, especially during the mid-1920s during times of industrial turmoil and apparent evidence of strike-breaking by Britain's early fascists.

However, a number of articles and books were also published during the period which took a more considered and reflective approach. Such material sought to address the possible deeper nature

and wider significance of the fascist movement in Britain, and demonstrated an interest not just in the practice but also in the nature of the ideology that was being articulated by the country's first interwar fascists. During the course of the following discussion, brief exploration will be made of some of the early interwar assessments of, and reactions to, both fascism abroad and, in particular, to its first British imitators during the early 1920s.

## Interpreting Fascism

During the initial interwar years, little consensus existed among British politicians and political commentators about *how* to interpret the new fascist phenomenon. The fascists had not yet carved out any significant 'political space' in the country (Durham), so the mainstream British political parties in the 1920s, and even sections of the radical Left, tended to regard fascism largely as an eccentric, imported and miniscule 'foreign' creed, and labelled it as such. As far as many commentators were concerned, Britain remained 'safe' and immune to extremism.

In so far as fascist ideology was taken seriously, those who adopted this stance were mainly on the far Left, and a standard Marxist view - that fascism was open *capitalist* 'reaction' - tended to dominate such assessments. This was maintained for much of the 1920s by such thinkers. By the early 1930s, however, especially when news increasingly filtered through about the fate of social democratic and liberal parties in Germany, the Left and other politicians in Britain began to devote more *theoretical* attention to trying to understand the nature of fascism. The Communist Left in particular sought to construct a comprehensive anti-fascist critique in their publications and wanted to disseminate this analysis more widely, but it was a critique which was - in essence - merely a reinforcement of an earlier Communist thesis initially developed during the 1920s.

Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that Communist assessments were not the only ones on offer: there were a still a range of other people who became concerned to grasp the nature of fascism almost as soon as fascists appeared in Britain in 1923. An investigation of such early assessments can yield important clues not just on the reactions in Britain *to* fascism but also concerning the main types of ideas being espoused by fascist ideologues *themselves*. As with the later (and more familiar) 1930s version of British fascism, as exemplified in Sir Oswald Mosley's 'British Union of Fascists' (BUF), certain core themes in fascist ideology and practise captured the imagination and fears of observers of British politics during the 1920s, which was a decade of acute anxiety within certain quarters about the general condition of British Parliamentary democracy and, indeed, of the future of liberalism in Europe.<sup>1</sup>

The first official fascist organization to appear in Britain was the British Fascisti (BF), founded in May, 1923, which a year later changed its name to the more Anglicized-sounding 'British Fascists'. It was created by Miss Rotha Lintorn-Orman (1895-1935), a young former volunteer ambulance driver who came from an aristocratic and military family background, and was fervently anti-Socialist. She came to see Mussolini's 'revolution' as a necessary measure which had 'saved' Italy from Bolshevism, and

felt a similar movement was required in Britain. The BF were out to defend the British Constitution and bring national 'salvation'. It is this party that will be the main focus of attention in the present discussion.



Sir Oswald Mosley and BUF members in Rome



National Fascisti giving out leaflets



Lintorn-Orman and British Fascists



British Fascists Head Office in London



BFs take the salute



BF leader Rotha Lintorn-Orman



BF journal The British Lion  
1927

## Reaction or Revolution?

The labels 'reaction' and 'revolution', and associated ideas concerning social and political change, strongly conditioned much of the early analysis and discussion of British fascism, and the BF in particular. Although the BF carefully avoided direct use of the word themselves, the first fascists in Britain, especially during the early to mid-1920s, were often proud to portray themselves, and to be seen by their political opponents, as 'reactionaries' – but in the strictly limited sense of being defenders of the *status quo* (or their version of it) and, in particular, of what they termed the 'Constitution'. Regularly referring to themselves as 'Loyalists' and 'Constitutionalists', the BF resolved to protect the British State against the threat of subversion and revolution from the Left.

Fascist ideologues claimed to be reacting in a counter-revolutionary fashion to what they perceived as a devious and comprehensive plot by 'Red revolutionaries' and 'foreign aliens' (the two were often seen as branches of the same subversive tree) to overthrow Parliament and the British Constitution, the latter being something of a catch-all term which usually included the Monarchy, Empire, and the main institutions of Parliamentary democracy itself. A revolutionary assault on the Constitution by 'Reds', the BF claimed, would in turn undermine the family, education and the very fabric of British society, including the wider Christian social order. As one BF writer put it succinctly:

"We are called reactionary; if the faith of militant Christianity, of class-friendship, of loyalty to the Crown and pride in our Empire, if that is reactionary, then we are proud to be so-called; nor can we see anything blameworthy in reacting against the sordid aims of Socialist parasites, or the pacifist bleatings of long-haired and short-memored fools".<sup>2</sup>

Elements of the BF certainly co-operated with the State at times. During the 1926 General Strike, for example, fascist activists were involved in strike-breaking to help the Conservative Government out-manoeuvre the trade union movement, which fascists were convinced had been infiltrated by Bolshevik agitators under the direction of Moscow.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, concurrent with this, the early fascists also exhibited an ambivalent attitude towards the notion of 'revolution', often rejecting the label, but at other times actually appropriating it. Thus, they still admired Mussolini's fascist 'bloodless revolution' (as they saw it), and at times viewed themselves as radical defenders of certain core values, the defence of which *might* entail the employment of illegal strong-arm and 'organised' tactics if necessary. As we shall see, this preparedness to break the law if necessary was justified with reference to the 'higher' needs of the State. The Monarch and State required protection at all costs, even from 'Constitutionally' elected governments (such as a Labour or Socialist government), especially if the latter clearly represented in BF eyes a genuine threat to the Monarchy and wider Empire. However, unsurprisingly, and quite conveniently, at precisely *what* stage this scenario would be deemed a reality remained rather opaque in fascist writings.

Despite the strong hints of the possible 'revolutionary' agenda that lay behind fascism's 'defensive' programme, opponents naturally much preferred to emphasise the 'reactionary' dimension to British fascism. In fact, as soon as fascists appeared in Britain in May, 1923, opponents - and the Left in particular - were determined to expose what they believed was the openly 'reactionary' and nakedly class-based nature of fascism. The BF was viewed as an anti-modern 'throwback' to past times, a relic of an age when the ruling-class had purportedly been determined to maintain a rigid and exploitative capitalist social order.

In general, then, the idea that fascism was essentially anti-progressive, and above all a conservative 'reaction' in some manner to the rise of organised labour, remained at the heart of most early analyses. We must now discuss the roots of such perceptions in Britain in more detail, as they were initially constructed in response to, first, the general rise of fascism abroad and, second, to the first open activities of adherents of the creed in Britain.

### **Lessons for Britain? Initial Reactions to Mussolini's Creed**

The rise of Italian Fascism was certainly viewed with interest by political commentators in Britain during the early 1920s, although it did not receive widespread coverage. The impression that Mussolini's movement was somehow introducing 'order' to counter and reverse revolutionary 'chaos', and that this could only be a good and positive development was, however, shared by important figures in both the British government and the mainstream press, as well as in some 'Die-Hard' Conservative journals such as *The Patriot*.<sup>4</sup> The Italian Fascist creed was mainly treated in a stereotypical way as a rather exotic and very unrestrained solution, a typical product of southern Mediterranean 'hot tempers', a 'foreign' creed unsuited to the supposedly calm English temperament. At the same time, many British politicians quietly approved of the Italian leader's destruction of Bolshevism.

They hoped that, in due course, Mussolini would 'settle down' and create a new Conservative party in Italy (Bosworth, 168). Yet, there was also growing awareness in some circles that Italian Fascism was not merely conservative and 'reactionary' but constituted something that was - potentially - very different to mere Conservatism. In an editorial in *The Times* of London in August, 1922, for example, the writer reflected that: "Italy is now making a curious experiment that may possibly be very instructive. She is searching for a form of government". The editorial noted:

"The Fascisti are a strange organisation of mixed origin. They are obviously not reactionaries, otherwise they would not have succeeded in withdrawing from Socialist influence such a considerable body of working men. They are intensely patriotic and at the same time, in their popular appeal, they stand for a return to the older creative ideals of Italian Liberalism. Their violence may too easily degenerate into excess, but it can only be understood as a reaction to the subversive forces which are undermining the independent existence of the nation".

On the general rivalry between nationalism and socialism in Italy, the *Times* editorial concluded that



the "struggle is extremely interesting".<sup>5</sup>

Other, lengthier, general assessments of the new Italian Fascist creed also began to appear in Britain shortly after Mussolini formed a coalition government in Italy in October, 1922. Furthermore, some of these commentaries identified common links between the Italian situation and what they perceived to be the crisis-ridden nature of politics in Britain. One of the first detailed analyses published was *The "Red" Dragon and The Black Shirts*, a 1923 volume based upon a series of articles by Sir Percival Phillips, originally published in the UK's *Daily Mail* newspaper. This book described Mussolini's rise to power in Italy and claimed to contain "the first complete and authentic account of the famous Fascisti movement" (Phillips P., 7).

During the course of the study, Sir Percival Phillips conveyed some of his impressions of the Italian Fascisti which, he implied, could be learnt from and adapted to other countries (and he undoubtedly had Britain in mind in this sense). In his estimation, Fascism in Italy had 'fought a holy war'. He claimed: "A nation has suddenly risen from its lethargy and made anew its profession of faith in principles which are the bedrock of our civilisation". He continued:

"Christianity, patriotism, loyalty to the state, liberty of the individual, recognition of the rights and duties of all classes of society, co-operation of all classes for the good of the country, obedience to established authority, social morality – all these tenets of national life which Bolshevism would consign to the dust-heap have again been embraced by the people of Italy, high and low alike, in a spirit of enthusiasm which is nothing less than sublime" (Phillips, 11).

In chapter 12 of the book, Phillips also explored the relationship between Italian Fascism and capitalism and labour. He noted:

"Signor Mussolini's attitude towards Labour is being watched with considerable anxiety by the workers throughout Italy. He is credited with the determination to make all strikes illegal, and this has been seized upon by the Socialists as proof that the Fascisti mean to put Labour at the mercy of the capitalists. I am assured that this is not true" (Phillips, 62).

However, Phillips then went on to quote from one of Mussolini's speeches, in which it was evident that the Italian leader intended to impose "the strictest discipline" in the interests of both the workers and the nation. Phillips pointed out that Mussolini was laying down "the broad principle that any policy which harms the nation cannot be tolerated", and this included "political" strikes (Phillips, 63).

It is worth noting that this was the type of policy that rightwing 'Die-Hard' Conservatives had been calling for in Britain. Even more revealing, in a preface to the Phillips book, H.W. Wilson contended that Mussolini and the Fascisti had rescued Italy from "the cruel despotism of the Bolsheviks and Communists", and that the "salvation" of Italy was an event of commanding importance: "It is full of hope and instruction for the world". Echoing some of the general attitudes of the *Daily Mail* to British domestic politics at the time, Wilson went on to argue:

"The Fascisti have proved that, if everything else fails, if a cowardly Government abdicates before disorder and crime, and if democracy goes to pieces, a nation with any virility can yet be saved by its able-bodied youth and patriots, acting under a man. An antidote has been discovered to Communism. A means has been found of destroying the poison spread by the Red propaganda and paralysing those who preach the class-war' (Phillips, 7).

Wilson also undoubtedly approved of Mussolini's attack on "waste" in government: "He is rationing departments in money and officials, and doing precisely what 'The Daily Mail' has suggested a hundred times should be done by Government departments here" (Phillips, 9). Interestingly, and importantly, in a brief four-page pictorial section in the centre of the Phillips book, a photograph was included of "Fascisti in London", saluting the Cenotaph as they marched by, accompanied by a British policeman. It is difficult to ascertain whether these were British Fascisti, or members of the Italian Fascisti in London, but the implication was clearly that fascism was showing signs of open support in Britain.

As well as Conservative and Die-Hard commentaries, more progressive-minded Liberals were also interested, and naturally more alarmed, by events in Italy. Another commentator who drew lessons from Italy for the rest of Europe was none other than the Liberal Party leader and former Prime Minister, David Lloyd George. However, Lloyd George was determined not to display any direct sympathy for Mussolini and drew very different conclusions from those expressed by writers such as Phillips. In an article penned in September, 1923, for example, Lloyd George analysed the Italian case.

During the course of this piece the ex-Prime Minister gave a particular meaning to the term 'reaction', discerning Fascism to be part of a more general reaction against democracy in Europe. He argued that the recent *coup d'état* in Spain was "part of the general movement of reaction against democracy which has arisen since the war". But Lloyd George also appeared to see a "revolutionary" dimension to this "reactionary" trend. In his estimation, this had started with the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, had swept over Italy, captured Bulgaria, and now Spain was the latest phase: "In fact, one of the most remarkable products of the war has been the imitation and extension of movements throughout Europe bearing a Fascist character". Indeed, Lloyd George saw little difference between Communism and Fascism: "In essence, Bolshevism and Fascism are a revolt against Parliamentary methods of government – in other words, against the democratic conception of government". To this end, Lloyd George saw Lenin as a "Fascist" who "was the first to substitute force for popular election in a democratic state".

Lloyd George emphasised that both Bolshevism and Fascism were "fatal to democratic government", and he warned that: "The spreading of reaction against democracy is a serious movement which needs careful watching in all countries". As far as Lloyd George was concerned, there were also important lessons for Britain in all this: "The extreme Conservative wing today do not conceal their enthusiasm for Mussolini and his methods. The Die-Hardism that brought the present



Government into the world is zealously Fascist in sympathy, outlook, and more and more in expression". He continued: "An increasing number of Conservatives are looking towards unconstitutional methods for security against the changes which democracy may soon demand. It is a dangerous hope to cherish". He added that this "weapon" was at hand for the Communist as well as the Conservative to handle.<sup>6</sup>

However, the *Daily Telegraph*, the Conservative-supporting newspaper which had carried Lloyd George's article, made it clear to its readers that, in giving him column space, it did not endorse the opinions expressed by the Liberal leader. In particular, an editorial in the newspaper two days later argued that Italian Fascism's boasts of "having saved Italy from something comparable to the hideous experience of Russia" advanced a claim "not easily answered". The *Telegraph* continued:

"Whatever may be said of Fascism and its leader, it is the truth that they crushed a perilous plot against society where others had signally failed; that they substituted a form of order for a state of political disruption and chaos that was growing ever worse; and that the response to their action was such a revival of the national spirit, such a renewal of confidence in the future of their country, as history has seldom seen".

The editorial further asserted that it did not agree that "reaction against democracy" was the correct description of the tendency which led to these results:

"The reaction in Italy, and now in Spain, is against a development of Parliamentary institutions which has taken them out of touch with the national life, and made them the playground of the petty ambitions and corrupt self-seeking of a small class of professional politicians".

Turning to Britain, the newspaper argued that this 'reaction' had made no appearance in the country "because we are fortunate in the type of applied democracy, and in the quality of public spirit, which has been evolved among us". It then added darkly: "But should our Parliamentary statesmanship ever fail us in the protection of society against an attack on its life, means of self-preservation would be found, as they have been found elsewhere".<sup>7</sup>

The admiration for aspects of Mussolini's regime was in further evidence in the *Telegraph* a month later, when it analysed "A Year of Fascism". In the newspaper's opinion, Mussolini had been "eminently successful" in bringing about social peace and 'the cessation of class warfare'. The detailed article continued, rather gushingly:

"The results are excellent, and during the last twelve months there has been not a single strike in the whole of Italy. This is a fact from which even Mussolini's detractors cannot get way".

Moreover, the *Telegraph* could not hide its admiration of Mussolini's social policies: "In his return to the Conservative tradition Mussolini is doing all in his power to strengthen the position and power of the family, as the foundation of a healthy national existence".<sup>8</sup>

Needless to say, critics on the political Left in Britain were shocked and angered by the *Telegraph's* stance. 'W.T.H' in *The Socialist Standard*, the journal of the Socialist Party of Great Britain (SPGB), for example, referred to "The Bacillus Mussolini" and complained bitterly that the *Telegraph's* "gloating contributor" had made little effort to conceal his sympathy for Mussolini and Italian Fascism. The SPGB writer noted sarcastically that all the "inestimable benefits" of Italian Fascism would soon be brought to British doors, as Britain possessed "at least two" Fascist organisations.<sup>9</sup>

Other, more mainstream, defenders of Parliamentary democracy still echoed the thrust of Lloyd George's analysis, and began increasingly to consider fascism as little different in nature from Bolshevism, giving the fascist creed 'revolutionary' credentials in the process. In a sense, and again with hindsight, they were also anticipating what was later to emerge in the 1950s as the "totalitarian" explanation of fascism by liberal critics, whereby both creeds were viewed as mass anti-liberal movements with much in common.<sup>10</sup>

One early example was an article by the Socialist theorist G.D.H. Cole, then a Reader in economics at Oxford University. As far as Cole was concerned, Communism in Russia and Fascism in Italy presented themselves to the student of current history "as twin riddles of the modern Sphinx". He noted:

"They stand to each other in a relation of violent antagonism. Their aims are sundered like the poles. Yet friends and foes alike recognize something in common between them – a community of method which is based on a common criticism of certain widely accepted ideas. They are two bulls in the European china shop; and the shopman fears for his china, whether they seek to gore him or each other".

Cole declared that the element "common" to both of these "fundamentally antagonistic movements" was that neither cared for democracy and Parliamentary government; he argued that, "to the Fascist, as to the Communist, the forces which more and more have power to govern the world are not to be sought in the organs of representative government and institutional democracy".<sup>11</sup>

Although he did not share Cole's social democratic stance, another example of this kind of "same difference" analysis was the work of the Conservative-supporting economist and writer Arthur Shadwell, who penned an article entitled "Bolshevism and Fascism". This appeared in the *Saturday Review* in early 1924. Shadwell, with the new British Fascisti movement in mind (formed a few months earlier), responded in his article to a "young friend" who was being pressed to join and sought Shadwell's advice. Shadwell counselled that the adoption of fascism by the young in Britain would be "a mistake" – it would be a mistake "like the Bolshevism which it is intended to combat". In an interesting comment on the supposed uniqueness of the British context, he also claimed that movements "transplanted bodily from other countries, never flourish here because the soil does not suit them". Moreover, Shadwell asserted, "such an organisation as the Fascisti would be an excuse

for the Left Wing to take the law into their own hands".<sup>12</sup>

We must now turn our attention more directly to the main manifestation of Mussolini's creed in early 1920s Britain, Rotha Lintorn-Orman's BF, and explore how both its dedicated supporters and anti-fascist political opponents perceived it both in relation to Italy and, above all, to the thorny conceptual questions of "reaction" or "revolution". Who, then, were Britain's first official fascists? What ideas and policies did they espouse? And to what extent were they 'reactionary', 'revolutionary', or a complex mixture of both?

### **The Emergence of British Fascism in the 1920s**

Shortly after they were launched by Miss Rotha Lintorn-Orman, the BF began to receive media coverage from both supporters and critics. Fascism, as a new movement, engendered both fascination and fear from observers of the 1920s political scene. Inspired by Mussolini's Fascist 'revolution' and the *Duce's* apparent determination to save Italy and Europe from the threat of rampant Communism, the main ideologues on the BF's Executive 'Grand Council' had come together to make the case for a similar movement to stamp out socialism in this country. The BF saw itself as reacting to the threat of potential revolutionary crisis, allegedly being planned by the enemies of the British King and Empire; at the same time, though, fascist ideologues also vigorously denied that they were merely a 'reactionary' or 'White Guard' organisation.

Whether accurate or not, some of the early observers of the new BF tended to agree with the fascists' view of themselves as embodying an essentially 'defensive' creed, but pushed this further and conceptualised the movement as still constituting a highly reactionary organisation, in the sense that it was led by predominantly middle-class and aristocratic leaders who were determined to resist the rise of *anything* that smacked of Socialism, Communism or 'progressive' politics. The fact that Mussolini had proclaimed his creed as "revolutionary", however, left some British commentators puzzled.

What did the Italian leader mean by "revolution"? In turn, were the BF in the same political mould, out to *overthrow* the government, or were they something qualitatively different, seeking to 'protect' the State and Britain's Parliament?

BF ideologues themselves were very sensitive to this ideological labelling difficulty. Some of the more astute BF leaders began to pen commentaries on the British version of fascism which were designed to both reassure the British public and, at the same time, still persuade their sympathisers and supporters that here was a very different type of political force – a creed that was *radically* Conservative, and not just content to sit back and passively watch events unfold. The BF sought, above all, to be 'activist' and ready for muscular deeds where necessary. Identification with 'Constitutionalism' and loyal support for the Monarchy were thus integrated with a more controversial extreme and markedly radical nationalism, which promised a 'crusade' for virile 'action' in the face of any Bolshevik or general trade union uprising in the country. The defence of the nation

and its central State institutions from internal and external enemies was held as being of the utmost importance.

Significantly, during 1925-26, there was intense discussion within the BF leadership circles between what can be termed the more 'cautious' and moderate elements, who wished to place the movement in a *purely* defensive role, at the disposal of and aiding the elected Government of the day, and the more 'radical' fascists, who conceived of British fascism as something more militant, independent-minded and, potentially, interventionist. The latter thinkers interpreted 'activism' as a strategy that was radical and anticipatory, designed to outwit their opponents' tactics by taking the battle directly on to the enemies' ground. Thus, while they hesitated to describe this as a more revolutionary approach, the implication from the 'radicals' in the BF was that subversive Socialist 'force' should be met equally by fascist 'force'. Evidence of this debate within the BF hierarchy over the precise nature and role of the movement can be discerned briefly in ideological articles in the BF journal *The Fascist Bulletin*.

In September, 1925, for example, one BF ideologue, evidently keen to equip British fascism with a more radical and distinctive ideological image, argued: "It is important, in considering the policy of the British Fascisti Movement, not to allow it to be collared by the influences which will work to make it a purely 'White Guard' organisation". Moreover, in the writer's estimation, the idea held by some critics that the BF as an organisation was not needed because of the existence of more suitable established bodies to provide force in defence of the Constitution, such as the voluntary Army Territorials and the police Special Constabulary, was mistaken. The BF writer reminded readers that an elected Government might not necessarily have the real interests of the State at heart: "The existence of Fascism as a force at all in this country is surely because it is still recognised by certain loyal and patriotic citizens that the constitutional authority might betray its trust – in fact be treacherous". The writer continued ominously:

If the constitutional authority is treacherous, recourse must be had to a higher authority for justification in upholding the existence of the State, and this is surely the basis upon which Fascism is founded".

The article's BF author added: "It must never be used as a force to uphold a treacherous authority which is betraying the country and the State".<sup>13</sup>

A short while later, another article reinforced this determination on the part of some in the movement to try to overcome the 'defensive', and reactionary, image of the BF, a thematic label highlighted regularly by anti-fascist critics of the movement. The author enthused that the country was "at last awakening to a sense of danger threatening our continued existence", and claimed that various "patriotic movements" were "bestirring themselves" thanks to decreased apathy: "We are amongst that happy number, but people who have disregarded us hitherto are asking in what British Fascism differs from, for example, any volunteer organisation to enlist special constables". The writer

continued:

"The answer is that such movements are purely defensive; they may postpone an immediate catastrophe, but what then? The attack will have been repulsed, but unless the causes that led to it have been tackled, it will only be a question of time before it is renewed under circumstances more favourable to its success".<sup>14</sup>

Although the intricacies of this internal debate remained confined to the movement's specialised publications, the question of whether the BF were indeed genuinely 'reactionary' or more radical sometimes shaped the ideas put forward by fascists in more mainstream media coverage of the movement.

Leaving aside the BF's own journals, and the inevitably propagandistic BF policy literature, a number of detailed statements of fascist philosophy were made available to the wider general public by British fascist writers. BF ideologues were anxious to acquire space for their cause in non-fascist and mainstream publications, and sometimes this internal debate over the reactionary or revolutionary credentials of fascism broke out into the open.

An example was the article by the leading British fascist General R.B.D. Blakeney, entitled "British Fascism", penned for the prestigious journal *The Nineteenth Century* in 1925. Blakeney at the time was the President of the BF (Lintorn-Orman remained the 'Founder'), and tended to push a more cautious, 'legal' policy line, rejecting the idea that the fascist movement itself was a "secret society". His article claimed that British fascism was the "adult growth... of the Scout Movement". Both movements supposedly upheld "the same lofty ideals of brotherhood, service and duty".<sup>15</sup> Blakeney portrayed the creed of fascism as one of the two new great forces of the Twentieth Century, the other being its mortal enemy, Soviet Communism, and he emphasised the 'British' nature of fascist doctrinal and organisational forms in this country. The article, unsurprisingly given Blakeney's strong fascist sympathies, was decidedly propagandistic and dogmatic in places and should be treated as such by the historian. Nevertheless, as an insight into the early apologetics and justification for British fascism from an 'insider' for the wider public it remains an important primary source.

Despite Blakeney's 'Scout Movement' comment, a careful reading of the article reveals that he had a much darker message, bound up with a concept of fascism as not only constituting "a useful weapon at the disposal of the authorities when the call comes", but also as a disciplined "fighting" machine able to engage in civil war: "The spearhead of each local organisation will consist of flying squads of young, active, unmarried men prepared to go anywhere and do anything".<sup>16</sup> A "virile organisation" such as the BF would help 'an awakened nation' make short work of 'the subversive well-organised minority'.<sup>17</sup> Fascism was thus conceptualised by Blakeney as a "new crusade" and a "struggle", engaging in a "life-and-death conflict between the forces of good and evil".<sup>18</sup>

Much of the article carried a strident anti-communist message, linking socialist "subversion" in with the "washy internationalism" of Liberals and the "nebulous authority" of "German Jews". The executives of trade unions were, Blakeney claimed, "passing into the hands of the extremists". Perhaps as a rejection of the idea of the BF as merely reactionary, the "classless" message of British fascism was also in evidence. The General referred to the "spirit that induces large numbers of men and women to lay aside all considerations of class or politics".<sup>19</sup> Conveying sensitivity to accusations of "foreignness" by opponents, General Blakeney also claimed: "Though Fascism originated in Italy, it has now become a world-wide movement; each nation interprets it in its own way, and ours is essentially British".<sup>20</sup>

In the same mould was Blakeney's article entitled "Future of Fascism in England", which appeared in the Sunday newspaper *The Referee* in June, 1925. In this fairly detailed explanation of fascism, the BF President argued that fascism was in tune with a change in public opinion, a change which he claimed was taking place because: "People are uneasily conscious that something is wrong". Touching upon the notion of rebellion, he then defined fascism as the "revolt of the level-headed, honest citizen against falsity", and made some (highly questionable) claims about the progress of British fascism, which he pointed to as evidence "of the growing intensity of the feeling that virile action is necessary".<sup>21</sup> Again, predictably, this was a very pro-fascist and uncritical article, which was part of a series of ideological contributions by members of the BF published in *The Referee*. These were aimed at promoting the 'legal' image and popular impact of British fascism for a wider audience, in the hope of providing the movement with greater democratic legitimacy. In fact, the newspaper itself displayed sympathy for fascism and did not attempt any real degree of journalistic objectivity in the space it gave to coverage of fascism, enabling Blakeney and his colleagues to use the newspaper - for a temporary period at least - as an additional, if unofficial, recruitment tool.

Blakeney was able to obtain additional BF propaganda successes in the sense that other newspapers sometimes provided notably detailed coverage of his speeches and ideas. While the revolutionary strand to fascism was hinted at, the 'revolt' was given a specific meaning: it was described in terms of action by rational people as opposed to "unreasonable" subversives. In May, 1925, for example, *The Newcastle Weekly Chronicle* carried a piece entitled "To Combat Communism", which reported on Blakeney's address at the Burlington Hall, Newcastle, in which the BF President had said that their 'enemy' was Communism, while fascism 'stood for reality - the revolt of reality against rot, common sense against cant'. Blakeney also alleged that there was a press campaign in Britain against Mussolini but that "Italy was prospering under Mussolini - there was peace and co-operation in industry there".

Paradoxically, however, at the same meeting, some BF officers were keen to counter accusations that fascism was revolutionary and 'foreign'. The newspaper reported that Major R.E. Cree argued the BF "had hardly anything in common with the Italian Fascisti. The Italian movement employed



revolution; they in this country wanted peace, and they were constitutional; they stood for King and country". The BF also stood for "free speech".<sup>22</sup>

A number of other examples can be pointed to in BF texts which illustrate this ideological accommodation of *both* rebellion and 'reaction', the latter defined in the sense of the patriotic *defence* of the current makeup of society against something which fascists claimed was genuinely "subversive".

Occasionally, some BF officers argued the movement was *neither* 'revolutionary' *nor* an adjunct to the Conservatives.<sup>23</sup> Equipping the movement with its own distinctive identity was viewed as a key goal. During the course of the later 1920s, however, a number of BF ideologues in the organisation became bolder and more explicit in their radical tendencies. They appeared even more determined to project an image of fascism as 'militant' or radical, in contradistinction to its earlier mainly cautious conservatism,<sup>24</sup> and increasingly lobbied for a more revolutionary, confrontational and explicitly 'Italian' approach to fascist politics, envisaging, for example, the adoption of new economic policies, such as corporatist ideas modelled directly on the Italian Fascist Corporate State.<sup>25</sup>

### **The Left Reacts: Throwing light on 1920s fascism?**

At the opposite end of the political spectrum, apart from occasional mainstream newspaper comments on the BF by left-wing journalists,<sup>26</sup> a number of the critics and opponents of fascism also began to make surprisingly detailed analyses of the wider significance of fascism in 1920s Britain, and often contributed to the 'reaction versus revolution' debate. A few voices declared that it was essential to respond to fascism in Britain urgently, before it gained any political momentum. In January, 1924, an attempt was made to launch an activist anti-fascist organisation called the "People's Defence Force" (PDF) (Copsey, 6-7). Although the PDF pledged to keep a "watchful eye" on the BF, it did not engage in any far-reaching analysis of note. On the other hand, The "National Union For Combatting Fascism" (NUCF), based at Hebden Bridge, Yorkshire, and also in Chiswick, London, promised to disseminate "vigorous Socialist propaganda" to combat the spread of BF ideas, and to this end published what was probably Britain's first leftwing anti-fascist newspaper, *The Clear Light*. This was edited by Alfred Holdsworth. This publication has been relatively neglected by historians (Copsey, 7) but it provides a useful insight into early political assessments of British fascism from a broad Left perspective.

The NUCF appeared determined to strongly counter the BF's propaganda claims to be upholding "constitutionalism", and emphasised the need for "lawful" anti-fascist opposition, hinting that, far from standing for law-and-order, fascism was in reality highly dangerous, un-British and "foreign". The NUCF's newspaper asserted: "We desire to proceed constitutionally". The organisation was, it claimed, "taking an intellectual and moral stand against illegality and savagery".<sup>27</sup> During its relatively

brief existence (1923-25), the newspaper gave column space to a number of more specialist articles which analysed both British fascist ideology and its organisation of 'street' activities, and predominantly saw the BF as a direct product of capitalism. In the October, 1924, edition, a "Labour Journalist" wrote:

"Fascismo will fail because its roots are not laid in justice. There can be no permanence to any society that is based on inequality, injustice and tyranny. That is why Capitalism, of which Fascismo is born, must pass".<sup>28</sup> Clearly perceiving the BF to be 'reactionary', the NUCF defined fascism as "the middle class organising on military lines, to play a militarist hand in the political game", and as: "Reaction reduced to an elemental fear for its own existence".<sup>29</sup> While *The Clear Light* provides valuable information for historians, it exemplifies the problems one can encounter when employing such sources: the NUCF strongly viewed fascism and capitalism as containing no obvious ideological differences, but today a number of historians of fascism treat such assessments with great scepticism.<sup>30</sup> Added to this, the newspaper tended to greatly over-estimate the numerical strength, and thus public appeal, of British fascism during the mid-1920s, claiming at one point that "their numbers are nearly one hundred times that of the Communist Party".<sup>31</sup> The newspaper's analysis of British fascism was further conditioned by its ideological and factional disagreements with other sections of the Left, particularly over questions of anti-fascist strategy.<sup>32</sup>

Nevertheless, the newspaper sought to bring all Socialists, Communists and Anarchists together in a common anti-fascist effort,<sup>33</sup> and its coverage, while not sophisticated to the modern eye, remains important as a source to because it can provide clues as to how parts of the non-Communist Left tried to deal with the BF and the appeal of fascist ideas. Moreover, on fascism's 'revolutionary' credentials, *The Clear Light* was adamant that this was in fact a disguise for "reaction". At one point it asked: "Is Fascism New?", and answered firmly: "No. To British Fascists it means the smash-up of the British Labour Movement. Whenever toilers have advanced, they have had Fascism of some sort to contend with". The article asserted: "That we are living in a revolutionary period is proved by the rapid development of the forces of Reaction. It cannot be denied", and it further warned that "if we do not grapple with Reaction wherever it shows its sinister face", an array of "Brute Force such as has never before been mustered" would leave the toilers less secure than ever. Against the "tide of aspiration", Fascism had again reared itself.<sup>34</sup>

The NUCF's discourse made frequent use of the language of revolution and reaction when assessing British fascism. In a letter sent to the *Daily Herald* in June, 1925, for example, Holdsworth's words exemplified the core message of the NUCF when he called upon all Socialists to unite against what he termed "Fascist reaction" (Copsey, 7) Just a month later, the NUCF returned to the precise nature of this 'reaction' when it put forward a further detailed account of how it perceived fascism in relation to capitalism, and its own role in this ideological picture:

"We are Socialists. We hold that the change from Capitalism to Socialism is revolutionary change. We are, therefore, revolutionists. We hold that the collapse of Capitalism is imminent, and that Socialism is the only practicable alternative. Furthermore, we hold that but for the counter-revolutionary forces the change from Capitalism to Socialism would be a peaceful change, and we see in Fascism the blackest and bitterest counter-revolutionary force that has ever arisen in this country".

Judging from this, although the NUCF had emphasised its own 'legal' strategy, it evidently was not afraid to borrow the language of revolution. However, it also realised the co-operation of all anti-fascists was vital. The article thus went on to argue that the British labour movement had evolved neither "the form of organisation nor the outlook" to help it frustrate "the counter-revolutionary elements", and it urged all Socialists, "despite their varying shades of opinion", to unite to check the "counter-revolutionary forces".

Sounding a pessimistic note, the NUCF continued: "We urge that if they are not checked now, and as they arise, Socialism is doomed to come only by way of social holocaust, with all the dangers of a post-revolutionary reaction that would bury the new society in the ruins of the old". Furthermore, in an interesting example of the interplay between the conceptual dichotomy of 'reaction' and 'revolution', and no doubt as a warning to the tactics of the Communists, the NUCF made it clear that it was determined to convey the message that resistance to fascism should remain peaceful and in touch with the masses. Not to do so would make anti-fascists little different from fascists: "To advocate violence is to play into the hands of the counter-revolution, and is, therefore, reactionary".<sup>35</sup>

Another organisation on the Left which sought to construct a full-blown critique of fascism was the Plebs League, originally formed in 1909. The League was dedicated to independent working-class education and, by 1922, had managed to establish a network (or 'Council') of local 'colleges' throughout Britain, consisting of discussion groups of Labour, trade union and Co-operative members. In October 1924, the Plebs turned their fire on the extreme Right and published *Fascism: Its History and Significance*, by 'L.W.', a fairly detailed volume with a dramatic painting of a skull on the front dust-cover. The book, written by Ellen Wilkinson under the anonymous moniker 'L.W.', was predominantly an analysis of Italian fascism for an English audience, but also contained a passionate critique of the forms of fascism appearing in other countries, including Britain. Moreover, the debate over whether fascism was genuinely revolutionary or still 'reactionary' underlay key sections of the text. The author complained that 'the capitalist press' had exercised "utmost skill" in representing Mussolini as the saviour of Italian civilisation "and the embodiment of almost all the political virtues". She also noted sceptically the claim that the fascists were not an anti-Labour force: "Mussolini himself constantly poses as the friend of the working classes, as the apostle of ordered freedom and proletarian well-being". But, after citing one of Mussolini's speeches, 'L.W.' argued that the Italian leader's pro-worker sentiments were in reality "a demagogic device" and were not to be taken seriously.<sup>36</sup> However, while 'L.W.' regarded fascism as "a force directed against the interests and

ideals of the workers", it was not sufficient, the writer continued, to define Fascism merely as an anti-labour force, like the 'White Guards' of Hungary: "Fascism has special characteristics which give it an international importance, even greater than that derived from its success in Italy. Fascism operates primarily in the interests of industrial capitalists".<sup>37</sup>

Although the book mainly put forward a crude Marxist view of fascism and categorised the Italian movement as "a bourgeois reaction to the revolutionary tendencies of 1920", it also embodied at one point a more sophisticated recognition that other versions of the creed in Europe might take varying forms: "It would be pedantic to deny the name of Fascist to movements in other countries simply because they do not conform in all details to the Italian model".<sup>38</sup> However, as far as 'L.W.' was concerned, while movements such as Hitler's National Socialists were "of a Fascist character" and were "permeating" the German trade unions,<sup>39</sup> fascism in Britain was "commonly regarded as an object of laughter, and, so far as its pretensions to the scope of the Italian movement are concerned, correctly so".

Moreover, 'L.W.' believed that the "economic and political conditions in England are not such as are likely to lead to the development of a powerful Fascist movement. The governing classes have other and better weapons to hand in the class war". This included, according to 'L.W.', the "reformist" trade union and labour leaders, who would ensure "the docility of the workers far more effectively than an amateur body of white guards". The writer further predicted: "Unless a vital change takes place in the situation, the English Fascisti will remain only a glorified Boys' Brigade in normal times, and will take their share in strike-breaking when the occasion arises".

Interestingly, though, in her discussion of the British fascist scene, the author added cautiously: "The Fascisti today have not the organisation nor the intellectual capacity to constitute a serious peril to the proletariat, but their development will be carefully watched".<sup>40</sup>

### **Over-Estimating Fascist Growth?**

At other limited junctures during the 1920s leftwing commentators in parts of the mainstream national press reported on the growth of fascism in Britain.

In so far as they gave it any detailed consideration, the pro-Labour Party sections of the leftwing press were particularly interested in the close relationship (as they saw it) between fascism, the Conservative Party and other elements on the Right. Occasionally, this took the form of some lengthier and more reflective analyses. A good example was the *Daily Herald* during early 1926 which, under the headline "Unmasking the Aims of Fascisti", reported on an investigation into fascism by 'Investigator', originally published in the February, 1926, issue of *Socialist Review*. In its summary of the report, the *Herald* argued that the results were the fullest examination yet into fascism in Britain.<sup>41</sup> The *Socialist Review* was the monthly publication of the 'Independent Labour

Party' (ILP), and was edited by John Strachey. If we consider the *Socialist Review* report itself, as a source for the historian the article has both useful and suspect material. In fact, the author of the survey acknowledged that he had been compelled to rely on some information vouchsafed by the fascists themselves. He therefore offered it to readers with some reserve. Above all, though, the writer treated the rise of fascism seriously, viewing it essentially as a form of anti-Communism, and was very interested in how the British version compared and contrasted with the Italian model. The report opened:

"The time has clearly come to examine the extent to which Fascist ideas are becoming prevalent in this country. It was obviously inevitable that a Fascist movement of some kind or other would be launched.

A dramatic revolution of the kind which submerged democratic government in Italy could not successfully take place without causing repercussions in other countries, and we know that the repercussions actually produced in other continental countries have been most serious - so serious indeed that the comfortable Victorian idea that freedom must more or less inevitably go on broadening down from precedent to precedent can no longer by any means be regarded as a political axiom".

The author thus warned gravely: "We may think that in this country we are fairly safe. We may conclude, after surveying the situation, that the Fascist movement here need not be taken too seriously. But enough has happened to make it essential for us to attempt to get at the facts".<sup>42</sup>

The report explored the makeup and nature of the BF and a maverick breakaway fascist group called the "National Fascisti" (formed in late 1924). It also noted the existence of a group called the "British Empire Fascists", although this organisation had seemingly disappeared. After exploring the ideology and programmes of the fascist groups, 'Investigator' decided that the British Fascisti were the more serious body, a movement which claimed to have 800 branches, "with memberships ranging from 200-5000". The author also suggested that, despite the organisation's promises to defend free speech, their real purpose was "put a stop to speeches which they regard as seditious". Moreover, the BF had a palpable strike-breaking purpose and displayed, in their manifesto, "evidence of their bias against trade unionism".<sup>43</sup>

After a prudent survey of the whole movement, 'Investigator' concluded that: "The Fascists seem to me to be amateurish, rather muddle-headed people, lacking any definite sense of direction". He also pointed out that the BF posed as "super-patriots... yet they take their name and inspiration from a foreign movement utterly un-British in its ideas or methods". The writer also emphasised that, in his view, the BF's anti-Communism would in fact play into the hands of the Communists, who would then argue that "forcible resistance from the Right would prevent a Labour majority in Parliament from carrying through its programme in a constitutional way".<sup>44</sup> This was a point that, as we saw

earlier, had also been made in the pages of *The Clear Light*.

While cautioning that "it would be a mistake" to ignore the existence of the BF, the writer suggested that it would equally be incorrect to take it so seriously as to "advertise it gratuitously".<sup>45</sup> The report by 'Investigator' then went on to argue that the "real danger" (as he saw it) was on the Conservative Right, emanating from old-fashioned 'Die-Hard' Tories disgruntled with the then Conservative government. The author concluded that, if these turned to fascism, they would find an organisation (the BF) ready to hand.<sup>46</sup>

Such a report, while invaluable to the historian of British fascism, should also be viewed with caution. For example, it would seem that the author treated the assertions of the BF concerning its number of branches and size of membership far too seriously, despite his caution at the outset, possibly basing his calculations on the BF's own propaganda journals, but without the necessary and rigorous sceptical distance required. Moreover, the references to the possibility of the 'Die-Hard' Right turning to fascism over-simplified the complex and ambivalent relationship the Die-Hards enjoyed with a 'foreign' inspired extreme Right ideology (Webber, Linehan, 54-55).

### **British Fascism and Contemporary Historians**

It is very important to place much of the preceding discussion into the context of ongoing debates that have been taking place in the secondary historiography on British history and politics in the interwar period.

The rise of the 1920s version of British fascism, and attempts to interpret it at the time, cannot be fully understood without seeking to contextualize new movements such as the BF and the Communist party in the political-party structure of Great Britain during this period. The re-election of a coalition government in 1918, far from stabilising the country after a period of wartime upheaval and severe economic pressures, had served only to create further divisions in the country. In fact, within British politics at the elite level, a clear rift emerged between those who wanted to continue with a form of *national* government and those who wanted to return to the 'normal', traditional pre-war style of two-party competition (McKibbin 2010 and 2019). Thus, with a discontented 'Die-hard' rightwing of the Conservative party determined to overturn 'coalition' politics, and an increasingly confident Labour party sensing that they could potentially replace the Liberal party as the main party of opposition, a new sense of uncertainty and 'crisis' took hold in the corridors of Westminster and among wider political circles. The appearance of fascists and communists in Britain seemed to exacerbate this apparent new political volatility, and a new chill of fear descended across both mainstream politics and the mass media.

In particular, as a number of historians have demonstrated, as early as 1922-23, acutely alarmist rhetoric about Labour's ostensibly ambitious economic proposals added further to the sense that Britain was now in serious danger from the 'Red' threat (Phillips T., Madeira). Moreover, with the



election of the first (minority) Labour government in late 1923, the conviction held by many on the Right that Labour was somehow being manipulated by secret Bolshevik and internationalist elements added further to the hysteria. This was exemplified in the October 1924 General Election campaign by coverage in the press of the notorious forgery known as the Zinoviev Letter (Bennett).

It is difficult to grasp the emergence of fascist impulses and organisations without understanding the 'siege' mentality that spread across the traditional political elites during these watershed years. Ironically, and with the benefit of hindsight, the return of the Conservative party to power in late 1924 seemed to many observers to be a welcome and comforting reaffirmation of the legitimacy of a strong two-party system, an institutional structure which helped immunise British politics from radical, extremist and 'foreign'-sounding parties of the Right or the Left. It certainly helped to damage and undermine the appeal of fascism in the country.

With reference to methodology, the preceding analysis of fascism in Britain in terms of 'reaction' or 'revolution' has been influenced by the 'cultural turn' that has taken place in the historiography on British history and politics over the last twenty or so years. For a long period of time, British political history was dominated by historians who adopted what has been termed a 'high political' approach to the interpretation of British history, good examples of this being the work of Maurice Cowling and Michael Bentley. They tended to insist that historians only needed to focus on what Cowling called "the politicians that mattered", or the main political parties and their front-benchers.

However, in recent times, a new generation of historians have been keen to break free from the 'high political' approach and to take more seriously the wider intellectual, cultural and societal contexts in which political struggles in Britain occurred. In other words, it is important to move beyond the 'high political' tradition and also seek to grasp the nature of 'outsider' movements, such as the fascists, especially the complex interplay between politics and popular culture that can be discerned during the 1920s, and also more generally during the interwar period. Approaching the radical right through the interpretative lens of a dialectic between 'reaction' and 'revolution' is arguably a useful step in this direction.

### **Conclusions: Fascism as 'Reactionary Modernism'?**

It is instructive to round off this discussion of the early assessments of British fascism by noting that the confrontation and interaction between the concepts of 'reaction' and 'revolution' continued to shape the coverage and political debates over fascist ideology during the late 1920s and early 1930s.

If we turn to the fascists themselves, the dialogue between the 'cautious' and 'radical' elements within British fascist ranks and like-minded discussion circles was still taking place as late as 1929.

For example, an interesting public exchange of letters took place in the pages of the Die-Hard journal *The Patriot* between, on the one hand, Geo Flower, a BF activist, and Major James Strachey Barnes, who had lived in Italy and had become very close to Mussolini (Baldoli and Fleming). Barnes, who was Secretary-General of the 'International Centre of Fascist Studies' in Lausanne, had kept a

close watch on the evolution of the BF.

In his letter entitled "Is Democracy Failing?", Flower had taken to task the view expressed by the Marquis of Londonderry a month earlier that both fascism and communism "are for revolt". Flower asserted: "He is right with regards to the latter, but with the former he is entirely mistaken. Fascism is out to oppose any form of revolt". Flower continued later: "British Fascism does not aim at revolution; it is established to prevent revolution, as is the case in many other countries where the Fascist movement has taken root".

Moreover, Flower complained, British Fascism was "national" in policy and loyal to the government: "Does he know that we loyalists were some of the first to answer the call of the Government at the time of the 'General Strike'?"<sup>47</sup>

Three editions later Major Barnes responded to this portrait of fascism as anti-revolutionary by penning a detailed letter to *The Patriot* on the nature of fascism. Major Barnes attacked Flower's views by arguing:

"These statements, left unqualified, may or may not correspond to the opinions of the majority of members belonging to the movement known as the British Fascists; but they do not correspond with the facts with respect to *Fascism*".

After reflecting on the violent form fascism had taken in Italy in order to deal with the "anarchy" created by communism and liberalism, Barnes voiced his opinion that:

"In other circumstances it might have developed gradually along constitutional lines, and there is no reason to suppose why this should not happen elsewhere. Nevertheless, its advent, whether achieved peacefully or violently, would constitute a revolution, because it would inevitably bring about a complete change of spirit and a complete reversal of the principles which hitherto have governed society".

In fact, as far as Barnes was concerned, fascism was "indeed a positive revolt against the various theories of the State which have dominated opinion and practice ever since philosophy ceased to have its roots in Christian thought". Barnes then asserted that: "Fascism may be regarded as a movement aiming at an anti-materialist revolution". The fascist Major also warned: "As far as the different parties in England are concerned, any true Fascist movement in England would therefore necessarily be opposed to all of them, because all of them, Conservative just as much as Labour, accept the basic doctrinaire liberal conception of the State".<sup>48</sup>

Major Barnes's emphasis on the 'revolutionary' credentials of fascism certainly chimed with some of the very pro-Italian ideologues within the BF, such as E.G. Mandeville-Roe, who was a strong advocate of corporatism. It also sat comfortably with Sir Oswald Mosley's new movement, the BUF, launched in 1932, and to which some important BF officers (including Mandeville-Roe and Neil

Francis-Hawkins) quickly defected. Interestingly, by the early 1930s, with the emergence of the BUF as a new mass fascist movement which was much larger than the BF, Mosleyite fascists in Britain were still sometimes portraying themselves as 'reactionary' but, like some of their BF predecessors in the 1920s, BUF ideologues strongly avoided using the actual word, and much preferred to present their creed as 'revolutionary'.

As far as Mosleyites were concerned, they were only 'reactionary' in the narrow sense that they were out to *resist* 'misguided' liberal prescriptions for social change, and wanted to resurrect or defend timeless and 'common-sense' traditions and institutions.

These were to be adapted to a new 'modern' and radical approach to managing British society and politics. In fact, the BUF were much more prepared than earlier fascists to question the *status quo* and embrace and promote the rhetoric and image of 'revolution', contemplating radical change to the liberal democratic Parliamentary structure, and seeking to create a fascist Corporate State based explicitly on the Italian model. In this sense, they embodied the ideological characteristics of what some historians have termed "reactionary modernism" (Herf).<sup>49</sup> Reaction and revolution could be synthesised within the same ideology.

Significantly, in an attempt to disassociate the BUF in people's minds from the earlier and, in his estimation, *mainly* 'reactionary' 1920s variant of British fascism, Oswald Mosley himself often proclaimed the 'dynamic' social and political programme of his new creed. He noted, for example, in the book that launched his Blackshirt movement in October 1932: "We are also faced by the fact that a few people have misused the name 'Fascism' in this country, and from ignorance or in perversion have represented it as the 'White Guard of reaction'". He continued: "This is indeed a strange perversion of a creed of dynamic change and progress", and claimed further that the BUF had "no place for those who have sought to make Fascism the lackey of reaction", adding that the BUF, in objective, was "revolutionary or it is nothing" (Mosley, 15).<sup>50</sup>

Longstanding critics of fascism in Britain were, quite naturally, highly suspicious of Mosley's claims to be 'revolutionary', preferring to view the BUF as just another version of what had come before. This is an important point.

As we have seen in the above discussion of perceptions of fascism in Britain in the early 1920s, and how various commentators viewed the creed, the assessment of the nature of fascism as essentially 'reactionary', especially its 'dishonesty' in trying to appeal to the working-classes, constituted a key weapon of anti-fascists and the general labour movement throughout the 1920s, and remained an important critique that would be employed by anti-fascists in the following decade.

Finally, although the ideology of the fascists in Britain in the 1920s evidently did not match the levels of complexity and policy detail found in some other European fascist movements, or in the later BUF of the 1930s, a possible step forward for future research on the British variant of the creed should

perhaps utilise greater methodological recognition of the value of interpreting fascism *generically*, and thus of viewing the British fascists of the 1920s within a wider comparative context. The pioneering work of historians such as Roger Griffin, for example, starting with his study *The Nature of Fascism* in 1991, has encouraged other researchers in the field to try to discern the definitional core of general fascist ideology. It *may* be that the interplay between 'reaction' and 'revolution' is something that was present not just within the British typology but was also at work in the ideologies of a variety of fascist movements across Europe during the interwar period.

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2. Letter from Ronald Coates, *Need For Fascism*, *The Patriot*, 13<sup>th</sup> December, 1928, p. 573. For other 'reactionary' themes see, for example: *The Ideals of British Fascism*, *The Fascist Bulletin*, vol. 2, no. 13, 26<sup>th</sup> September, 1925, p.1, and: *Manifesto*, *The Fascist Bulletin*, vol. 2, no. 21, 21<sup>st</sup> November, 1925, p. 2. See also the letter from Ronald Coates, *Fascism or Revolution*, *The Patriot*, 14<sup>th</sup> July, 1927, p. 46.
3. *British Fascists in the Strike*, *The Patriot*, 3<sup>rd</sup> June, 1926, p. 492; Richard Maguire, *The Fascists are to be depended upon: The British State, Fascists and Strike-Breaking 1925-1926*, paper delivered to 'The Labour Movement and Fascism' Conference, University of Leeds, 8<sup>th</sup> November, 2003.
4. For examples of attitudes towards Italy in a 'Die-Hard' sympathising journal, see: *Fascismo in Italy – Dispelling the Communist Gloom*, *The Patriot*, 25<sup>th</sup> January, 1923, p. 406; *Mussolini*, *The Patriot*, 16<sup>th</sup> August, 1923, p. 24; *Italian Fascismo*, *The Patriot*, 29<sup>th</sup> April, 1926, pp. 409-12. For an early view of British fascism and its relation to the Italian version, see 'Miner Patriot', *The British Fascisti*, *The Patriot*, 18<sup>th</sup> October, 1923, p. 170. For discussion of both British government and mainstream UK press attitudes towards Italian Fascism, see R.J.B. Bosworth, *The British Press, the Conservatives, and Mussolini, 1920-34*, *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1970, pp. 163-82.
5. *The Government of Italy*, editorial, *The Times*, 12<sup>th</sup> August, 1922, p. 13.
6. David Lloyd George, *The First Fascist: Modern Cromwells*, *The Daily Telegraph*, 22<sup>nd</sup> September, 1923, p. 9. Interestingly, Lloyd George returned to his anti-fascist critique in 1925: *Mr. Lloyd George Denounces Fascism*, *The Westminster Gazette*, 6<sup>th</sup> January, 1925, p. 1, p. 3.

7. *Origins of Fascism*, editorial, *The Daily Telegraph*, 24<sup>th</sup> September, 1923, p. 8.
8. *A Year of Fascism*, *The Daily Telegraph*, 25<sup>th</sup> October, 1923, p. 9.
9. *The Bacillus Mussolini*, *The Socialist Standard*, vol. 20, no. 234, February, 1924, pp. 84-85.
10. A useful summary of this particular perspective in the historiography is contained in A. James Gregor, *Interpretations of Fascism*, Morristown, General Learning Press 1974, pp. 213-237.
11. G.D.H. Cole, *Fascist War on Labor Unions*, *Current History*, vol. XXIV, no. 1, April, 1926, pp. 54-61 (Note: This was a U.S. publication but widely available in Britain). Cole's Oxford perspective concerning the similarities between Communism and Fascism was also echoed to some extent at Cambridge University. In a Union Society debate in November, 1924, one speaker argued of Communism and British Fascism: "Both were intolerant and both were intolerant of the intolerant". See: *Mediaeval Intolerance*, *Cambridge Daily News*, 26<sup>th</sup> November, 1924, p. 3.
12. Arthur Shadwell, *Bolshevism and Fascism*, *Saturday Review*, vol. 137, 2<sup>nd</sup> February, 1924, pp. 100-101.
13. *Fascists Policy*, *The Fascist Bulletin*, vol. 2, no. 10, 5<sup>th</sup> September, 1925, p. 1.
14. *The Ideals of British Fascism*, *The Fascist Bulletin*, vol. 2, no. 13, 26<sup>th</sup> September, 1925, p. 1.
15. R.B.D. Blakeney, *British Fascism*, *The Nineteenth Century*, January, 1925, p. 132.
16. Blakeney, *ibid.*, p. 139.
17. Blakeney, *ibid.*, p. 140.
18. Blakeney, *ibid.*, pp. 140-141.
19. Blakeney, *ibid.*, pp. 139-140.
20. Blakeney, *ibid.*, p. 140.
21. R.B.D. Blakeney, *Future of Fascism In England*, *The Referee*, 21<sup>st</sup> June, 1925, p. 1.
22. *To Combat Communism*, *The Newcastle Weekly Chronicle*, 23<sup>rd</sup> May, 1925, p. 10.
23. Sometimes BF officers had argued that the BF were neither 'revolutionary' nor an adjunct to the Conservatives. See, for example, O.C.G. Hayter: *British Fascists Constitutionalism of Parliamentary Procedure Adopted*, *The British Lion*, no. 21, August, 1927, pp. 10-11.
24. For example, see John Cheshire, *A Defence of Militant Fascism*, *The British Lion*, no. 28, 1929?, p. 2. Interestingly, Cheshire clearly saw the BF as different to both "Constitutionalists and Socialist alike". Moreover, he proposed the BF should hold the "revolutionary" proletariat "in check" through eugenics.
25. By 1929-31 key ideologues within the BF were clearly embracing what might be termed a more 'revolutionary' political language, and began to voice greater denials that the movement was 'reactionary'. See, for example: *Is Fascism Practicable in England?*, *British Fascism*, no. 11, May, 1931, p. 8, and: 'The Voice of the Nation', *British Fascism*, no.12, June, 1931, p.3.
26. See, for example, Gladfly: 'To B.F. Or Not To B.F.', *The Daily Herald*, 10<sup>th</sup> October, 1925, p. 5.

27. *Constitutionalism, The Clear Light*, no. 17, October, 1924, p. 1.
28. *A Commentary, ibid.*, p. 2.
29. *The National Union for Combating Fascism, The Clear Light*, no. 25, July, 1925, p. 1.
30. As Roger Griffin has pointed out, for example, by assuming fascism to be an essentially anti-proletarian force, leftwing analysts play down its antagonism to the ethos of *laissez-faire* economics, consumerist materialism, and the bourgeoisie. Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, London, Pinter 1991, p. 4.
31. *The National Union for Combating Fascism*, p. 1.
32. *Ibid.* p.1. See also *The Clear Light*, no. 17, October, 1924, p. 2.
33. *Announcement. The Clear Light*, no. 18, December, 1924, p. 4.
34. *Is Fascism New?, The Clear Light*, no. 19, January, 1925, p. 1.
35. *The National Union for Combating Fascism*, p. 1.
36. 'L.W.' (Ellen Wilkinson), *Fascism: Its History and Significance*, London, The Plebs, October, 1924, p. 5.
37. 'L.W.', *ibid.*, p. 7.
38. 'L.W.', *ibid.*, p. 31.
39. 'L.W.', *ibid.*, pp. 31-32.
40. 'L.W.', *ibid.*, p. 34.
41. *Unmasking the Aims of Fascisti, The Daily Herald*, 29<sup>th</sup> January, 1926, p. 2.
42. 'Investigator' (pseudonym), *The Fascist Movement in Great Britain, The Socialist Review*, new series no. 1, February, 1926, p. 22.
43. 'Investigator', *ibid.*, p. 27.
44. 'Investigator', *ibid.*, p. 28.
45. 'Investigator', *ibid.*, pp. 28-29.
46. 'Investigator', *ibid.*, p. 29.
47. Geo Flower, *Is Democracy Failing?, The Patriot*, 17<sup>th</sup> January, 1929, p. 69.
48. J.S. Barnes, *What Is Fascism?, The Patriot*, 7<sup>th</sup> February, 1929, pp. 141-142.
49. This term was first put forward in 1984 in Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1984. Various historians have since employed and broadened the concept to help better understand some of the ideas at the heart of wider European fascism.
50. See also Oswald Mosley: 'Revolution of the Nation', *Fascist Week*, no.1, 10<sup>th</sup> November, 1933, p.5.

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