The Radical Right in Britain: Social Imperialism to the BNP

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Whilst the politics of the British radical right has produced a flourishing scholarship, there has been little systematic attempt to understand its development over the long term. Alan Sykes’s latest book, which traces the fortunes of the radical right throughout the course of the twentieth century, is subsequently a welcome and timely addition to the ongoing debate. This work provides a pithy synthesis of the existing historiography, making it a useful introductory text for students. In addition, by re-evaluating the intellectual development of the radical right over a long time period, Sykes provides a largely cogent and original perspective on these controversial movements.

The author’s chief focus is on gaining a clearer understanding of the ideology of the radical right, rather than addressing questions of its popular reception or relations with the mainstream political parties. This approach works most effectively in the first chapter, which concentrates on the Edwardian period, the author’s chief area of specialism. There has been some tendency to stress the regressive nature of the Tory right during the early decades of the twentieth century. This can be partly explained by historians’ focus on episodes such as the House of Lords ‘Diehard’ revolt against the 1909 budget. Sykes’s analysis compellingly demonstrates that the radical right were not crude diehard ‘backwoodsmen’, inimical to change. Instead they had a sophisticated worldview, which emerged from the social Darwinist theories of the late-Victorian period. Many feared ‘racial degeneration’ brought about by the creation of teeming slum populations. The fact that Britain took three years to win a war in South Africa against weakly-resourced Boer farmers made these anxieties particularly acute. The radical right intended to counter this threat through social reforms and by ensuring Britain’s long-term economic prosperity, which would be achieved by preferential trade within the Empire. Sykes’s analysis complements the excellent work of Ewen Green. His *Crisis of Conservatism* demonstrated how debates within the Edwardian Conservative Party, particularly over fiscal policy, were influenced by the desire to find a new ideological platform to counter new liberal progressivism (1). However, there are significant differences between the authors’ approaches, which are largely implicit in Sykes’s text. Green refers to figures who followed Chamberlain’s tariff reform crusade as ‘Radical Conservatives’, chiefly intent on reforming the Conservative Party. Sykes’s analysis contrasts with the Green thesis. He demonstrates that the radical right’s ideology had an uncomfortable relationship with the party system, drawing on the earlier work of Bernard Semmel on social-imperialism (2). Semmel demonstrated that enthusiasm for a programme of social reforms and imperial development, as a means to
enhance Britain’s ‘national efficiency’, was voiced across the political spectrum during the Edwardian period. Left-wing intellectuals, such as Sidney Webb and Lord Rosebery, subsequently had a significant ideological impact on the world view of the nascent radical right. As Sykes shows, the politics of Chamberlain’s supporters cannot simply be explained in the context of policy discussions within the Conservative Party, significant though these were. Indeed, it can be argued that it was only after tariff reform divided the political world in 1903 that a clearly identifiable radical right emerged. The ideology of this movement tended to fracture party bonds rather than enhance them.

Alan Sykes’s focus on ideology also provides a useful corrective to scholarship on the British radical right, which has been influenced by studies of the German right. Following Eckhart Kehr’s pioneering work during the 1930s, scholars have tended to argue that the social-imperialism, practised by the pressure groups (Massenverbande) of the German right was expedient and tactical. Schemes of imperial development were cynical and designed to undermine the development of the Social Democratic Party. In effect, groups like the German Navy League were effectively ancillaries of the anti-socialist bloc (Sammlungspolitik) (3). Early work on British social-imperialism suggested that similar domestic political motives drove the British movement. This approach also informs the Green thesis, which stresses the electoral concerns underpinning the development of the ‘radical conservative’ programme. Sykes convincingly demonstrates that the concept of advancing Britain’s imperial mission was a more integral driving force behind the development of the Edwardian radical right. Their ideas were imbued with the concept of developing a ‘Greater Britain’, in co-operation with the self-governing dominions. Rather than simply maximising Britain’s wealth, Chamberlain’s conception of tariff reform required sacrifice by the British consumer. As Sykes puts it: ‘The outlook amounted to a redefinition of national wealth’ (p. 18). In the short-term, the British consumer would have to pay more for their loaf. This inconvenience would be more than compensated for by the development of Britain’s future as a leading world power. This would be secured by inter-imperial trade and the creation of a healthier populace through social reforms. Sykes’s analysis cogently portrays Edwardian social-imperialism as being based on a potent constructive imperialist ideology, rather than being motivated by domestic concerns and political expediency.

Sykes’s appraisal of the First World War and inter-war periods offers a useful overview of the radical right’s development, during one of the most controversial times in its existence. Study of the patriotic right during the Great War has been surprisingly limited, despite the mushrooming of pressure groups during these years. Sykes is compelling in his analysis of the failure of the major radical right groups that emerged during the Great War, the National Party, and the British Workers League. As he demonstrates, both groups lacked clarity in their intellectual platforms and offered programmes that were unpalatable to many moderate Conservatives. However, Sykes’s account does not fully convince in this regard. Surely the failure of these groups also owed much to the context of the time in which they were founded. The later years of the Great War were a singularly difficult time to launch a political party. The Conservative Party leadership had overthrown Asquith in December 1916 and was deeply concerned to stabilize the country’s political situation thereafter. Their fears about potential instability were heightened by industrial unrest at home and the collapse of the Russian war effort in 1917, which raised the spectre of international Bolshevism. Consequently, it seems unsurprising that many of Henry Page Croft’s erstwhile supporters were reluctant to endorse the National Party, when it broke away from the Conservatives in summer 1917. Conservative activists might flirt with the pressure groups of the radical right during these years, but it was the Conservative Party that they viewed as the bulwark of the war effort during this time of turmoil. Sykes is surer in his analysis of the failure of Oswald Mosley’s fascist groups in the 1930s. The short-lived New Party was an uneasy mixture of the ideologies of the left and right. One important area of analysis, which is largely omitted in Sykes’s coverage of this period, is the role of gender issues in the development of the radical right. This question has produced some innovative and intriguing scholarship in recent years. For example, Julie Gottlieb has explored the appeal of the British Union of Fascists to women, and Brock Millman has analysed the hyper-masculine politics of violence employed by patriotic groups such as the British Workers League during the Great War (4). The politics of violence seems to be a recurring thread throughout the history of the radical right. Its most famous example is, of course, the notorious fascist
meeting at Olympia in 1934. Radical right violence remained a simmering undercurrent, coming to prominence repeatedly, such as when Combat 18 inspired disturbances at an England football game against Ireland in 1995. Such issues arguably deserve more prominence in this book. Sykes has a sure understanding of the ideological frameworks of the inter-war radical right, but it would be intriguing to know more of how its fortunes were affected by the gendered nature of its appeal and its use of violence.

Throughout the book Sykes highlights the links between radical right groups and their predecessors. Such an approach seems to be particularly sound for the pre-1945 period. As Sykes demonstrates, Mosley can be portrayed as the inheritor of the social-imperial tradition of the Edwardian period. His economic ideas during the early 1930s drew heavily on the concerns with British industrial development, which the radical right had expressed in Joseph Chamberlain’s era. However, the links between this tradition and the postwar radical right seem more tenuous, as Sykes acknowledges. His coverage on the post-1945 radical right analyses several obscure pressure groups of the 1950s and 1960s, such as the League of Empire Loyalists, emphasizing how they provided a basis for the present-day National Front. Sykes should be praised for his coverage of the latter group, which, innovatively, draws heavily on internet resources. Leaders of the 1960s radical right, such as Chesterton and Tyndall may have drawn extensively on the pre-war tradition, but the populist politics of the modern National Front seem far removed from earlier movements. As Chris Waters’s work has demonstrated, the public debate around race relations and what constituted ‘Britishness’ was transformed by mass immigration into Britain from the Caribbean and Indian sub-continent from the late 1940s onwards (5). The pre-1945 radical right had previously sought to develop the resources of the empire. However, its programme eventually became centred on protecting native Britons from the perceived injustices they faced from the presence of the migrants from the former colonies. Such a change in outlook suggests that the concept of a twentieth-century ‘radical right’ is a somewhat artificial term of analysis. Despite this, it seems fair to say that Sykes’s work demonstrates that it is essentially a more useful concept than competing terms such as the ‘far right’. The race-patriot groups of the Edwardian period form a key component of Sykes’s definition of the radical right. Whilst they provided an important intellectual basis for the development of British fascism, they fit uneasily with conventional ideas of what constitutes the far right.

Alan Sykes has produced a thoughtful and well-structured work, which manages to analyse a complex subject with clarity and a sure understanding of the intellectual debate. Sykes makes a largely convincing case for using the ‘radical right’ as a term of historical analysis. Whilst the groups of the twentieth-century radical right differed sharply in outlook, they shared a unifying ‘hyper-nationalist’ outlook (p. 2). The author cannot be expected to provide detailed coverage of the relationship between mainstream politics and radical right ideas in a work of this length. However, Sykes’s book raises some important questions in this regard. Of particular interest is the issue of why some figures flirted with the radical right but then defected to more moderate forms of conservatism. Sykes provides an intriguing reference to Henry Page Croft’s Peoples Defence League. This was a short-lived strike-breaking organization, formed in response to a strike on the Clyde in early 1919. For Sykes, this ‘looks uncomfortably like an effort to create a British Freikorps’ or even some form of ‘private army’ (p. 43). If we agree, and see Croft as keen to launch such a sinister form of patriot violence in 1919, it is important to ask why he became a relatively quiescent figure thereafter? Page Croft rejoined the parliamentary Conservative Party in 1922. His approach to tariff reform campaigning subsequently moderated, through his work with the Empire Industries Association. By 1928 he had become Chancellor of the Primrose League, a group associated more with tea-dances than violent street politics! Perhaps there is a qualitative difference between the nature of radical right groups during this period, compared to the post-1945 era. The social-imperial groups of the Edwardian period, such as the Tariff Reform League and the Navy League, which provided an organizational basis for figures like Page Croft, were effectively conservative ginger groups. They were often supported by prominent Conservative parliamentarians such as Austen Chamberlain and Andrew Bonar Law. Subsequently there was a significant overlap between moderate conservative and radical right identities. It could be argued that it was only after the radical right became firmly associated with disreputable forms of organization, such as street violence and international fascism, that these two identities polarized. Jon Lawrence has argued that the years immediately following the Great War marked a watershed in British public politics. Sometimes-violent
contests over public space between rival parties had been common in the Edwardian electoral politics. Violent ‘street politics’ became even more pronounced during the war, when radical right groups such as the British Workers League regularly threatened to break up pacifist meetings. Such forms of rowdy political activism were far less common during the inter-war period and came to be associated with extremists, within public discourse (6). As the twentieth century progressed, joining a radical right organization involved a far more decisive rejection of the mainstream political order than it had done in the earlier years of the movement. Social Darwinist groups that were active during the postwar nadir of the radical right, such as the obscure National Socialist Movement, were well and truly beyond the pale following the horrors of the Holocaust. They seem far removed from the comparatively innocuous, mass-supported groups of the Edwardian era. Nevertheless, these points, important though they are for future research, should not detract from the overall value of Sykes’s excellent, well-considered synthesis of the current scholarship. One theme that recurs throughout the book is the continuing ability of the radical right to adapt to and manipulate public grievances, which were seen as being ignored by the mainstream parties. In the troubled post-9/11 world such a book deserves a wide readership both within and, more especially, outside the academy.

Notes

2. B. Semmel, Imperialism and Social Reform: English Social-Imperial Thought (London, 1960). Back to (2)

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