The English Array, the BUF and the Dilemmas of British Fascism

It would be fully consonant with the traditions of our governing class if British Fascism appeared in an almost unrecognisable form.

John Strachey

if we ever have fascism in this country, it will creep in disguised in the red, white and blue of patriotism and the young conservatives.

Harold Nicolson

Obviously Anglo-Saxon fascism will resemble Hitlerism rather than Mussolinism.

Aurel Kolnai

Introduction: British fascism

Was there a distinctively British form of fascism? The idea that fascism was a continental European import, thoroughly irrelevant to British concerns and unsuited to the British way of life has long been part of received wisdom. It is an idea that has been promulgated since the earliest days of Italian Fascism and German National Socialism, as a letter written to the cultural journal the New Age reveals: in response to an article by the Nietzschean scholar Oscar Levy in which he praised Mussolini, this correspondent wrote:

I trust you do not suggest that the doctor’s ideas should be adopted by our nation. The principles of the Italians, Machiavelli and Mussolini, and the philosophy of the Polack Nietzsche, may be suited to the Latin and other Mediterranean races, but they are alien to the northern genius. Benevolent tyranny is the best thing for nations composed of gods and worms, but leadership without too much rule is better for the more homogeneous nations of the north.
This letter typifies much of the contemporary response to fascism: fascism is fine for the Italians and the Germans, but not for us. As the authors of one popular study of the European dictatorships had it, ‘democracy failed in Italy and Germany because it was an alien tradition introduced on a foreign model. Let the future leader of England remember that dictatorship is alien to the English race and traditions.’ Or as T. S. Eliot put it most succinctly, fascism was ‘an Italian regime for Italians, a product of the Italian mind’.

What such typical British statements on fascism of the inter-war period actually meant was: ‘We would like to introduce a form of “national recovery” in Britain, but we do not want to be seen to be imitating foreign ways.’ To back up this claim, I will examine in this final chapter the activities and writings of the little-known group the English Mistery, which later became the English Array. In doing so, I will challenge the view, derived from traditional approaches to political history (those dealing with electoral statistics, parliamentary papers, Home Office reports and other ‘official’ documents), that dismisses British fascism as a pale imitation of its more illustrious continental counterparts, and hence as no more than a footnote to British history. Instead, I argue that there is more to the political life of a country than ‘high politics’, since apparently peripheral movements are not always as irrelevant as they seem. Even if it was never remotely likely to storm the bastions of Westminster, the English Mistery is revealing of certain strands of thought in Britain at this time. Its interest lies not in whether or not it presented a challenge to the established political authorities – it did not – but in the fact that it had links, both personal and ideological, with much wider strands of thought in inter-war Britain, from the ecological and rural revivalist to the National Socialist, and all the movements, interest groups, and political groupings on the intervening spectrum. Most importantly, the English Mistery proves that a movement that is recognizably fascist could develop in Britain, thus scotching the comforting myth that fascism was foreign to the British political tradition. I do not wish to exaggerate the threat of British fascism but merely to trace the intellectual provenance of the movement, showing how it grew out of domestic political and cultural concerns.

In other words, historians of fascism who have concentrated solely, or for the most part, on the high political activities of Sir Oswald Mosley and the British Union of Fascists (BUF) have ignored the many cultural links that existed between fascists sensu stricto and numerous other individuals and organizations, such as those we encountered in chapter 4. While many involved in such groups may have been protesting too much when they attempted to dissociate themselves from European fascist movements, that they nevertheless did seek to do so indicates that the inter-war British radical right cannot simply be reduced to the Blackshirts (the obvious imitators) but must include all those whose ideologies can certainly be seen as...