

That was the world that was

Tomorrow Belongs to Us: The British Far Right since 1967

edited by Nigel Copsey and Matthew Worley

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Although the book begins in 1967, *Tomorrow Belongs to Us* is primarily the story of the post-1968 generation's influence on the British far right. We begin in a world where the National Front is reassessing the war and its relationship with anti-Semitism, Nazism and the Empire. We end in a world of English Defence League (EDL), 'EDL Angels' and social media: where lifestyle issues such as animal rights, feminism and gay rights can be utilised as part of a cultural war against radical Islam. The personal has become the political.

It's an interesting story charted across a number of essays by various academics. Although the authors don't always share the same analytical prisms, a number of events reoccur: Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech, the influx of Asian refugees from Uganda, and 9/11, to name a few. Although the historical markers are familiar, not all of the essays' subjects will be. Two of the book's twelve essays deal with the singer Ian Stuart Donaldson and the band Skrewdriver. Donaldson also pops up quite frequently elsewhere. Arguably he's a little over-represented. Perhaps you can overdo the personal over the political. We get welcome research on emotion and the far right but nothing substantial on religion.

To some extent the patchiness of the essays goes with the territory. As with many similar collections, there are some arcane and interesting spokes but there's less than a non-specialist would want at the hub of the wheel. For instance, fundamental questions about how you define the far right, how you measure its influence and its changing demographic make-up are never tackled head-on. Instead you have to piece together the range of insights offered by individual writers.

This lack of definition is a major absence. You want scholars to forensically pick through how you can usefully define the far right and how the definitions and practices of the far right have shifted over time. All the more so because of the recent ways in which labels like 'alt-right' have been so cheaply thrown around by the media. Some of the people and organisations featured in the

book not only deny being far right they explicitly set themselves against the far right. Contemporary figures like Anne Marie Waters discomfort easy categorisation, while even figures as extreme as David Myatt move from the far right (or at least across it) to Satanism, Islamicism and New Age philosophy. Rather contentiously, the essays dealing with contemporary Britain seem keen to lump UKIP and Brexit into the orbit of the far right.

Nevertheless, the lack of an explicit analytical bedrock that is shared by the authors has some thought-provoking consequences. You notice that nearly all of the writers draw their source material from the writings of prominent political leaders such as Colin Jordan, John Tyndall and Nick Griffin. Another major group of sources are magazines like *Bulldog*, *Spearhead* and *Identity*. Some use oral interviews and government records. What you realise then is that, while the book presents itself as part of a 'social turn' in studying the far right, it is still (as a social turn) peeking through the windows of the far right's institutions and administrative machinery. While interesting, this remains a only partial picture of far right activism.

The consequence is that the volume is strongest when it's working in the realm of ideas. Perhaps the book's stand-out chapter details doomed recent efforts to develop a coherent economic programme. Appropriating ideas from social credit and distributionist thinking takes the far right to some odd places. Attempts to square the circle between opposition to global capitalism and support for private enterprise can drive the far right to idealise somewhere as unexpected as Bali: gift economies where 'virtually every man and woman [. . .] is an accomplished artist and dancer'.

Tomorrow Belongs to Us is also compelling when it is tracking how evolving ideas in the far-right rub against more deep-rooted dilemmas. While the path from A. K. Chesterton to EDL Angels narrated in the book is unpredictable and rather strange, the essays also leave you in no doubt about the issues that they have been unable to move past. Strategically, the far right in Britain appear locked in a cycle that sees them lurch from attempts at 'electability' – where they focus on issues like crime, immigration and the safeguarding of children – through to attempts to provoke 'mass awakenings' by carrying out acts of revolutionary violence. A recent example of such an attempt at revolutionary violence was when Darren Osborne drove a van into a crowd of people outside of Finsbury Park mosque in June 2017

Among other things, this cycle also appears to map very roughly on to the political cycle: electability seems the preferred strategy of the far right during a Labour government and violence during a Conservative one.

A fundamental issue in this kind of research is that the distance between the academics and what they write about often appears so huge that closing it would require a large effort of imaginative empathy. For obvious reasons the majority of academics go the other way and view the far right fretfully and at some distance. While you understand the moral reasons for this by treating the far right as a lost tribe, you invariably lose contextual understanding and the result is that it casts some of the analysis into doubt. The emotional, imaginative and cognitive starting points of the investigators and what they investigate couldn't be more different.

To give a minor example, the book is full of descriptions of the machinations of far right organisations. Often these machinations are absurd and the people who contribute to them are by turns delusional, incompetent and pathetic. Super-planetary egotists dominate them. These descriptions sound totally believable, as they will to anyone who has spent time at poorly attended meetings of pretty much any local council, trade union or political party. Here and elsewhere it's not always clear that the phenomenon described is entirely – or even mostly – down to the far-rightness of the far right. American scholars of the far right seem to have been braver in moving beyond this.

The lack of contextual sensitivity especially weakens many of the book's international comparisons, where the claimed existence of international imaginative communities of the far right is sometimes used in a way that airbrushes enormous geographical, historical and cultural differences. You can make comparisons between the BNP and Golden Dawn without reference to the social life of Mani, Orthodox Christianity and the cultural memory of Metaxas and Papadopoulos. But, if you do so, it's likely that you are making comparisons of only the most banal and superficial kind.

It's also peculiar how many of the authors appear worried by the prospect of nationalism going international. Despite the self-regarding irony, there is probably something in Yanis Varoufakis' quip that Europe is under threat from a 'Nationalist Internationale' but the comparisons here show the opposite. International connections are what you console yourself with when you don't matter domestically.

Quite obviously the form extreme nationalism takes depends on the local environment. So, on the one hand, the far right in Britain tends to be geographically concentrated in a small number of areas that have high levels of immigration and that have been particularly hard hit by deindustrialisation. This can already make it difficult to 'nationalise' what are a set of very local issues. On the other hand, while Islamophobia has been the far right's path

towards the mainstream in contemporary Britain, in continental Europe radical Islam is more likely to be used to amplify the far right's anti-semitism. In both cases attempts at internationalism seem to pose the British far right as many problems as it solves. This is a lesson Donald Trump's former advisor Steve Bannon only appears to be learning now.

Although the book's authors continually assert that the period since 1967 has seen a far right revival, you're also struck by how marginal it has been in British life in comparison to mainland Europe and the United States. For all the media noise and think-tank panic, the far right has been an astonishingly puny political force. It would be interesting to explore the reasons behind this, because one sobering effect of reading the book is the realisation that how anyone growing-up since the start of the war on terror might be able to nod along with aspects of the far right's analysis. Taken together, someone born in 1990 would have experienced some or all of the following: the demonization of Islam post 9/11; the turn of the century wave of mass immigration; 7/7 and the erosion of civil rights; greater politicisation of the justice system; the hollowing out of the traditional media; and then the Great Financial Crisis, endemic banking fraud and austerity. You couldn't have designed an environment more amenable to the conspiratorial memes of the far right: the UK's recent experience could easily be framed from the far right (as well as the far left) as the punishment of national communities by the agents of international finance.

Tomorrow Belongs to Us also illustrates that, while the far right in contemporary Britain have been relentlessly opportunistic, whatever minor successes they have secured in the short-term have fallen apart. They haven't had the competence or organisational ability to distil outrage into something more electorally significant. Although social influence can exist beyond electoral progress, what you learn from this book is that the British far right has become extremely fluid: it absorbs and repurposes ideas from an enormous array of sources. This fluidity arguably makes enduring influence beyond electoral success even more unlikely. This perhaps explains why the first-hand accounts of life in far right organisations detailed in this volume already come drenched in the same queasy nostalgia that you get with the autobiographies of East End gangsters. That was the world that was.

One of the fundamental ironies is that although the designation 'far right' implies something hard and unyielding, in Britain it has not been a rooted conservative force. To date the far right seems to have been changed far more by British society than British society has been changed by the far right. The closing chapters focus on digital activism and the role the far right plays in churning out propaganda and channelling outrage. Here the British far right

becomes something both less and something more: whatever it lacks as an effective political body it retains the potential to popularise new formulations that might alter the political weather. Yet, even when it successfully generates slogans, it does not have the power to direct them. The overall impression that you get is that the use of social media by organisations like the EDL is already over-studied: these new strategies of the far right could just as easily represent the beginnings of a final collapse into irrelevance as a smart way to seed the future. Despite the predictions of doom-mongers, on the evidence presented here, that tomorrow remains a long way off.

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