

# The Scapegoat and the British Far-Right in Historical and Contemporary Context

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We are currently witnessing a widespread rise in populist far-right political discourse. The election of Donald Trump and the increased share of the electoral vote of far-right parties across European nations demonstrate this universal trend. Within the UK, this is also evident by the recent rise of UKIP, Brexit, the street activism of the English Defence League (EDL), and more recently the Change.org campaign to 'Free Tommy Robinson' which has over 600,000 signatories to date. The success and appeal of far-right rhetoric across the western world is certainly a cause for concern, yet at the same time, this concern is not new. The interwar period saw the emergence of several totalitarian states across Europe and even where national political systems remained stable, such as in the UK and France, there was still an intensification of political extremism and violence. The value of a historical criminological approach is that it helps contextualise the rise of the right within the current political environment as a continual problem that intensifies under specific social conditions. In particular, this short article reveals a comparative analysis of the experiences, attitudes and emotions among working class populations that led to a rise in the demonization of Jews and Muslims in past and present contexts respectively.

Recent ethnographic research has highlighted the social, political and cultural experiences of those who have participated in far-right activism (Winlow et al, 2017; Pilkington, 2016; Treadwell, 2015; Treadwell and Garland, 2011). What this research offers is the realisation of the sociological imagination by analysing the collective experiences of individuals within the wider social changes and challenges they are presented with in their daily lives. The current neoliberal society is one which creates fertile ground for the growth of far-right nationalism. This link has been acknowledged by Winlow et al (2017) who argued that the narrow diversity within the political mainstream has excluded the poor white working class. Furthermore, the current danger of the dominant neoliberal values of 'personal agency, hard work and meritocracy' that govern the political landscape, is that it dictates that the unemployed and those living in poverty only have themselves to blame (Winlow et al, 2017: 153). Therefore, it is not surprising that so many become marginalised and seek alternative political movements that recognise their personal troubles and attack the system that created them. However, it is the increasing ontological insecurity felt by the white working class, who are living through the destruction of their communities, increasing social inequality, and unstable employment, that is being capitalized on by the far right. The 'fragmented, incoherent and unstable socioeconomic system' manifests objectless anxiety in depoliticised subjects who turn to criminality and punitiveness (Hall 2012: 160). This 'fear with no rational and consensually recognised object' forces the far right to focus 'inwards' on immigration and a changing social landscape through a racially manufactured ideology, while unconscious to the 'external' forces of neoliberal competitive consumer capitalism which allows social inequality to thrive and social harms to be created in spite of race, religion or nationality (Hall and Winlow, 2015: 112).

The situation is similar across Europe, as Berezin (2009: 6) observed that ‘the European right is not alone in its evocation of insecurity... [but] it has arguably been the most effective in bringing the emotion of fear to the foreground of political discourse.’ This fear capitalises on visible changes within society such as increasing Muslim immigration to the UK. In times of austerity and the rationalising of local authority resources, feelings of ‘hostility, resentment and fury’ are manifested and directed at the Islamic ‘other’ (Treadwell and Garland, 2009: 621). Yet, the demonization of Muslims has not just been in areas with high Muslim populations; Jock Young (1999: 29) reminds us that the role of the immigrant as a scapegoat is set up to ‘assuage ontological insecurity rather than a cause of such.’ For example, Garland and Chakraborti (2006) highlighted that many ‘low’ and ‘high’ level incidents of racist hate crimes also occur in rural areas with little diversity and immigration. Furthermore, UKIP harnessed significant support from counties like Cornwall in local council and European elections in the lead up to the Brexit referendum.

In this article, the voices of the past are analysed following the social research of Mass Observation, which was established in 1937 and set out to record an ‘anthropology of ourselves’ (Mass Observation, 2015). This research on 1930s Britain contextualises the lived experiences of those who lived in a previous time of mass unemployment, austerity, rising immigration and a refugee crisis as Jews fled Nazi persecution. The interim report on Anti-Semitism (Mass Observation, 1938) published in December 1938 includes observations of Jews and Cockneys of London’s East End, which covertly recorded aspects of their social lives whilst also recording structured interviews. Additionally, the report offers an abridged version of the mass of data collected by 2,000 volunteers across the country and gives prominence to the views most frequently recorded to offer a greater generalisation of the anti-Semitic feeling of the era. Throughout this report there is an overriding suspicion and dislike of Jews by people who did not consider themselves to be anti-Semitic. While most of the participants in this research were not directly involved with the BUF, there were sympathetic mentions of Mosley and many of the attitudes recorded were consistent with anti-Semitic BUF propaganda. Similarly, a common aspect of Winlow et al’s (2017) research identified that those engaged with the EDL did not consider themselves to be racist. Here, the demonization of the foreign ‘other’ is examined through the shared attitudes of the working class from both eras in relation to their perceptions of failed multiculturalism and integration.

The BUF offered a sense of order to members in a world harmed by war and economic insecurity. The young men of the 1930s were the children of the First World War. They would have lived through the uncertainty of the war years and lost fathers, uncles and brothers to the senseless violence. They would have hoped for a brighter future which was crushed by the Great Depression that resulted in mass unemployment with little welfare provision available for able bodied adults. Mosley’s propaganda therefore used these great catastrophes of the early 20th century to discredit the established political system as the cause of such disorder. Arguing that Britain never recovered from the Great War, Mosley (1934:17) stated that ‘In 1929 - a year which is now regarded as the peak of industrial prosperity – British trade was slack, large industrial areas were almost derelict, and only the stock markets enjoyed a semblance of boom conditions.’ His message to the working classes was clear; it was only the wealthy and

those with capital that benefited from the economic and political system. For Mosley and his supporters, Fascism would bring back the order and security they desired. Anti-Semitic scapegoating became a useful tool for recruitment which went hand in hand with their nationalist policy as they recommended the deportation of Jews who do not put 'Britain first' (Mosley, 1936).

An important reflection made by the observers in East London, where the street population was recorded as one Jew for every 1.36 Cockneys (Mass Observation, 1938: 6a), is that the 'Cockney and Jew [were] living together in the same street and often in the same house, but [were] living in different social worlds' (Mass Observation, 1938: 26). This is reflected in the spaces of leisure observed such as cafes, dance halls, music halls and pubs. For example, the cafes frequented by Jews tended to be differentiated from others because of the types of food served in them. Within the dance halls, observations identified that people would be put off going to certain dance halls if they had a reputation for having Jewish clientele. Responding to being asked about a certain music hall, observers recorded comments such as 'It's alright for a Jews' place' and 'It looks attractive... But it's too Jewy. You are like a stranger in your own country' (Mass Observation, 1938: 19-20). In a pub count recorded throughout public houses in Stepney on a typical Saturday evening, it was recorded that only 10.7% of clientele were Jewish. Throughout the report there is a sense of failed multiculturalism that is reminiscent in many of the debates today. The rhetoric of those sympathetic to the EDL argue this as a specifically Muslim issue, stating 'Afro-Caribbeans, Sikhs, Hindus, Jews, they integrate into British society. Muslims don't' (Winlow et al 2017: 127). For many, this lack of integration is highlighted by Islamic cultural norms such as the wearing of female veils, halal meat and sharia law. Not only are these seen to be inconsistent with British identity and values, but more importantly they are seen by those sympathetic to the far right as a deliberate threat. For example, in Winlow et al (2017: 96), one respondent stated, 'they're taking over, they're not blending in... They just want to take over the country and, basically, do whatever they want.'

The identity of the Jew in both dress and behaviour was a recurrent feature within the Mass Observation survey. The survey identified that it was common for Jewish men to dress smarter than their Cockney counterparts. From observations and interviews with tailors it was more common for Jews to buy more expensive hand-made suits, as one tailor stated, 'You will never see a Jew in bad quality cloth, it doesn't really pay in the long run' (Mass Observation, 1938: 10). Such fastidiousness is often interpreted by Cockneys as the Jew trying to be 'better than he really is' (Mass Observation, 1938: 25). This is also seen in leisure where the Jews more commonly sat in the expensive seats at the cinema and frequented the more exclusive bars. Yet, it is important to note here that it is those who lived alongside the Jews who only perceived that the Jew felt superior, which led them to be envious of Jewish people and therefore found them 'easily detestable' (Mass Observation, 1938: 26). Added to this, the social deprivation felt by the non-Jewish poor and working class only intensified this situation.

M. 35. "I don't agree with bringing 30,000 refugees into the country when our own unemployed are starving"

M. 60. "There's enough out of work in England without bringing them over to take our jobs."

M.65. "Don't think much of them. Be like Hitler and get rid of the blooming lot."

In a similar way to Cockney jealousy over the expensive dress and leisure pursuits of Jewish people in the 1930s, the white working class of today often feel they are marginalised from consumer society in a system that privileges immigrant Muslim families:

I couldn't afford to treat the kids to even just some extra goodies in the shopping... and they're [Muslim immigrants] out shopping, you know, living it up... and I'm just thinking, 'How can they afford that when I'm working five nights a week?' (Pilkington 2016: 160).

You see them in flash cars and all that. Where the fuck do they get the money for that? (Winlow et al 2017: 156).

For the white working class of the 1930s and today, this marginalisation from consumer society is intensified when they feel excluded at the expense of a 'foreign other'. Fascism offered a return to a traditional past, but commenting on the interwar period and the present era respectively, Hobsbawm (1995, p. 118) and Winlow et al (2015: 132) identified this past as 'artefact' and the construction 'of a utopian dream of a world it never truly possessed'.

This historical criminological approach identifies that when certain social conditions exist, it threatens individuals' ontological security which brings disorder and uncertainty into our social spheres. The desire to return to a previous era, even one which only exists in myth, becomes increasingly alluring. Often that myth will exclude the recent immigrant that is scapegoated for society's current ills. The need to create order and to maintain a recognisable identity in an uncertain world was just as present in the 1930s as we are seeing today. The comparative analysis of past societies offer a valuable historic understanding to the present we now live. By targeting other forms of primary source data such as the letter pages of fascist newspapers, the biographies of former activists, and the oral histories recorded at witness seminars, a greater assessment of the personal troubles and public issues within the historic period can be understood. This historical contextualisation then becomes 'intrinsic' to contemporary social science research rather than merely 'general background', as it demonstrates the continual development of political economies and their effect on societies (Wright Mills, 2000: 150).

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