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“Our Own British Race”: Distinctive Approaches to Racial Ideas in British Fascist Movements, 1922-1940

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6/ “Our Own British Race”: Distinctive Approaches to Racial Ideas in British Fascist Movements, 1922-1940

Hartley CHARLTON

ABSTRACT: *This article identifies and analyses the distinctive character of British fascist racial ideas during the interwar period. While they formulated their racial ideas upon different premises there were consistent themes that were moulded to the British context. Movements had variable levels of radicalism, different interpretations of race in the fabric of British life, and contrasting perceptions of how racial issues should be presented and exploited. These divergent discourses manifested in ideological divides within broadly accepted British nationalist themes, rather than wholly separate doctrines. Interwar British fascist racial ideas therefore not only reveal the distinctive Britishness of such concepts, but also the idiosyncratic approaches of different movements.*

ABSTRACT: *Questo articolo intende identificare e analizzare il carattere distintivo delle idee razziali espresse dal fascismo britannico durante il periodo tra le due guerre mondiali. Sebbene queste fossero basate su premesse diverse dagli altri fascismi, vi fu comunque la volontà di indirizzare il dibattito verso la specificità del caso britannico. All'epoca nel Regno Unito vi erano livelli differenti di radicalismo, diverse interpretazioni della questione della razza, così come sussistevano percezioni contrastanti su come le questioni razziali dovessero essere proposte e assimilate dalla popolazione. Il dibattito provocò divisioni ideologiche all'interno del nazionalismo britannico, ma fu comunque sposato un discorso univoco piuttosto che una netta separazione di carattere dottrinale. Come vedremo, le idee razziali del fascismo britannico sviluppate durante gli anni Venti e Trenta non solo rivelarono la singolarità dell'interpretazione britannica, ma anche l'approccio idiosincratco dei movimenti che li difesero.*

1. Introduction

British fascism in the interwar period had a pronounced awareness that «fascism is also international» with common elements, but the claim of the British Fascisti (BF) that «the British interpretation differs [...] in the same degree as the Italian and British mentalities differ» was a commonplace view amongst movements¹. It was largely pre-existing native elements, such as die-hard and reactionary conservatism, as well as Henry Hamilton Beamish's The Britons society, that

¹«What is Fascism?», in *The British Fascisti*, URL: < <https://britishfascisti.blogspot.com/p/literature.html> > [accessed on 24 January 2020].

shaped fascist racial ideas and experiments with Foucauldian “biopower” in the United Kingdom, leading to the assertion of a “British race” around notions such as aristocracy and imperial identity. International and contemporaneous elements of fascist racial ideas, such as Aryanism and antisemitism, were often re-contextualised for British political culture.

The broad themes across the racial ideas of different British fascist movements did not preclude inconsistency. Indeed, race was of variable importance to individual movements and British fascist thinkers, often in accordance with the extent of their radicalism. The leader of the Imperial Fascist League (IFL), Arnold Leese, believed that «All is Race; there is no other truth»². In contrast, Sir Oswald Mosley, leader of the British Union of Fascists (BUF), later claimed that «Race is important, but it is not everything»³. This polarity between essentialist and non-essentialist understandings of race underpins comparative approaches to British fascist ideas. This split also broadly coincides with the influence of evolutionary science in fascist thought, allowing movements to be grouped into two different categories according to the nature of their racial ideas: social-Darwinist or neo-Lamarckist. These evolutionary scientific labels suitably encompass the core racial ideas of fascist movements, indicating their different pseudo-scientific origins and capacity for contrasting discourses, even if such classifications may occasionally be restrictive.

Social-Darwinism, derived from classical Darwinism, explains race entirely in biological terms and describes «a severe struggle» between organisms that «can only lead to natural selection of those variants which are best fitted to their conditions of life»⁴. When applied to conceptions of race, the social-Darwinist view suggested that individuals could not change, with unalterable hereditary characteristics, including psychological and behavioural traits, determining their survival within the environment. The most prominent social-Darwinist British fascist movement was the IFL, which used specific physical types and anthropology to identify races. For example, Leese compared mankind’s different races to different dog breeds⁵. He guided the racial policy of the IFL using his inflexible belief that characteristics could not be acquired and that hereditary genetic endowment alone determined behaviour. Other social-Darwinist British fascists included a branch of «international nazism» from the Nordischer Gesellschaft, titled the Nordic League (NL), and the Nordics, which merged with the IFL in 1933, as well as a range of other fringe cliques⁶. Using social-Darwinist theory, these groups ultimately advocated the racist view that there was a biologically evident hierarchy of human races based on their ability to survive due to

² LEESE, Arnold S., *My Irrelevant Defence: Meditations Inside Gaol and Out on Jewish Ritual Murder*, London, I.F.L. Print. & Pub. Co., 1938, p. 3.

³ MOSLEY, Oswald, *Mosley – Right or Wrong?*, London, Lion Books, 1961, p. 130.

⁴ DODSON, Edward O., «Neo-Lamarckism, Modern Darwinism, and the Origin of the Vertebrates», in *Journal of Paleontology*, 35, 5/1961, pp. 1065-1076, p. 1065.

⁵ THURLOW, Richard, *Fascism in Britain: A History, 1918-1985*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1985, p. 89.

⁶ LINEHAN, Thomas, *British Fascism 1918-39: Parties, Ideology and Culture*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2000, p. 179.

hereditary characteristics, thereby indicating the value of different ethnic groups. These social-Darwinist organisations seldom referred to themselves as such, preferring the labels of «racialists» and «racial fascists»⁷.

Neo-Lamarckism, on the other hand, proposed that organisms could functionally adapt their characteristics in response to environmental stimuli. This perspective was derived from the older theory of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck which offered a «transformist concept of species modification through environmental adaptation»⁸. Neo-Lamarckists advocated «the basic idea that the environment was a determinative force in evolution rather than a selective one»⁹. It was «vital forces» that motivated changes in individual characteristics¹⁰. The most prominent neo-Lamarckist British fascist movement was the BUF, where «no scientific racial theory was ever advanced by any senior figure in the party», leading to an environmental, cultural, and behavioural understanding of race¹¹. It recognised races «not [...] by reason of what they are», but «by reason of what they do»¹². For example, groups such as Jews were determined to be «culturally incompatible» rather than biologically inferior¹³. Beyond an ostensible disregard for blood heritage, BUF racial discourse was heavily reliant on spiritual notions of «heroic vitalism and creative evolutionism»¹⁴. Neo-Lamarckists understood race to be effectively fluid since organisms could adapt to their environment, meaning that it was theoretically possible to transform through sheer vitalist willpower, and, potentially, adopt the alleged behavioural attributes of other races and assimilate into a different culture.

Other organisations do not clearly fit within an evolutionary scientific classification, speaking to the fluid nature of British fascist racial ideas as a whole. The BF may be best described as neo-Lamarckist due to its use of spiritual rhetoric and more outwardly tolerant conservative colonial attitudes, but it also gave more countenance to blood heritage than the BUF. William Joyce's National Socialist League (NSL) appropriated some BUF behavioural racial concepts, suggesting a neo-Lamarckist classification, but there were also clear absolutist and hereditarian interpretations of race in the social-Darwinist tradition. Ultimately, neither the BF or NSL may be clearly placed in either category since they never developed or explained their racial ideas as far as the BUF and IFL.

⁷ LEESE, Arnold S., *Out of Step: Events in the Two Lives of an Anti-Jewish Camel-Doctor*, London, The Carmac Press, 1951, p. 53.

⁸ NYE, Robert A., «The Bio-Medical Origins of Urban Sociology», in *Journal of Contemporary History*, 20, 4/1985, pp. 659-675, p. 661.

⁹ GILLIS, Anna M., «Can Organisms Direct Their Evolution?», in *BioScience*, 41, 4/1991, pp. 202-205, p. 203.

¹⁰ PFEIFER, Edward J., «The Scientific Source of Henry George's Evolutionary Theories», in *Pacific Historical Review*, 36, 4/1967, pp. 397-403, p. 398.

¹¹ TILLES, Daniel, *British Fascist Antisemitism and Jewish Responses, 1932-40*, London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015, p. 67.

¹² JOYCE, William, *Fascism and Jewry*, Metairie, 1976 [ed. or.: London, BUF Publications, 1936], p. 3.

¹³ TILLES, Daniel, *British Fascist Antisemitism and Jewish Responses, 1932-40*, cit., p. 59.

¹⁴ THURLOW, Richard, *Fascism in Britain: A History, 1918-1985*, cit., p. 18.

The varying approaches to racial ideas from each British fascist movement may be partially attributed to their different purposes and individual senses of political pragmatism. The IFL, for example, put racial issues and a particularly unhinged form of antisemitism at its core. Leese believed the IFL's «chief function» was to be a «training organisation for an elite of antisemitic propagandists, not as a political party in its own right»¹⁵. This is demonstrated by the IFL's claim that it was bound to «educate the Nation to the glories of past achievement» and «prepare the younger generation of Britons for the splendid responsibilities of heritage, and government which await them»¹⁶. The Nordics were similarly fanatic, being committed to «spreading race consciousness amongst Britons of “Nordic blood”»¹⁷. These groups had very limited political acumen, believing that «England's Loyalty can only spring from the bond of Aryan Blood» rather than campaigning or a platform of attractive policies¹⁸. Rather than appealing to a broad segment of the British electorate, these organisations' hard-line, essentialist racial policies primarily attracted those who were already radicalised, which heavily constrained growth¹⁹. As such, Leese accurately reflected that the IFL «was left in a position of comparative obscurity»²⁰.

Beyond these groups that behaved more like social movements than political parties, the approach to codified racial policy in British fascism was generally tempered by disinterest or political pragmatism. The BUF's purpose was to win mass appeal, so Mosley was conscious to present the BUF as a civilised organisation that eschewed racial prejudice and only used violence defensively. The extreme radicalism of the IFL was never impeded by the need for respectability, while it was Mosley's foremost aim to form the BUF into «an outwardly reputable political party» to win mass appeal²¹. The organisation was politically pragmatic and recognised that there was not a strong appetite for racial policy in Britain. As such, it «never really formulated an elaborate racial theory» and BUF publications were, more often than not, disinterested in race²².

To an even greater extent, the BF never took a hard line on racial issues, being motivated primarily by anti-communism. In spite of its name, the BF may be better described as ultra-conservative rather than fascist. The group's leadership was drawn from «a Conservative milieu» and, as a former member, Leese suggested «there was no fascism within the organisation»²³. While the BF did contest some local elections, the group was mainly associated with the

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 72.

¹⁶ LEESE, Arnold S., BLAKENEY, Robert D. B., *Imperial Fascist League: Policy and Organisation*, cit., p. 3.

¹⁷ LINEHAN, Thomas, *British Fascism 1918-39: Parties, Ideology and Culture*, cit., p. 179.

¹⁸ «God Save the King!», in *The Fascist*, May 1935, p. 1.

¹⁹ DORRIL, Stephen, *Blackshirt: Sir Oswald Mosley & British Fascism*, London, Viking, 2007, p. 203.

²⁰ LEESE, Arnold S., *Out of Step: Events in the Two Lives of an Anti-Jewish Camel-Doctor*, cit., p. 52.

²¹ TILLES, Daniel, «The Myth of Cable Street», in *History Today*, 10/2011, pp. 41-47, p. 42.

²² BENEWICK, Robert, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, London, Allen Lane, 1969, p. 151.

²³ RENTON, David, *Fascism, Anti-Fascism and Britain in the 1940s*, London, MacMillan Press, 2000, p. 12.

Conservative Party, canvassing for it and stewarding its meetings²⁴. As a result, the BF was trapped between more radical organisations and the Conservative Party, and was largely disinterested in racial issues beyond concepts already established by late Victorian and Edwardian reactionaries. In fact, historians agree that the reigning hegemony of the Conservative Party and its popular appeal through successive general elections was key to the failure of interwar British fascist movements, as it «marginalis[ed] the early fascists»²⁵. The successful consensual rule of the Conservatives left «little space available» for British fascism, which seemed to possess a uniquely unappealing combination of fairly banal conservative racial attitudes and capricious Aryanism, eugenicism, and antisemitism²⁶.

Each interwar British fascist movement was relatively ephemeral and, of course, there is no British fascist regime to refer to. Hence, study of British fascist racial ideology tends to be limited. The most thorough analysis is in Richard Thurlow's overview of British fascism, *Fascism in Britain: A History, 1918-1985* (1985). Other scholarship such as Thomas Linehan's *British Fascism 1918-39: Parties, Ideology and Culture* (2000) actively built on the work of Thurlow, offering more detailed insights into the nature and origins of racial ideas, particularly on the issue of antisemitism. More recent investigations of British fascist racial ideas have provided insights into ideological relationships with specific principles and entities such as the British Empire, including works by Paul Stocker and Liam Liburd, as well as detailed profiles of individuals like Arthur Kenneth Chesterton and William Joyce by Luke LeCras, Graham Macklin, and Colin Holmes. The historiography of British fascist racial ideas is understandably dominated by the issue of antisemitism, which continues to provoke new analysis in works such as Daniel Tilles's *British Fascist Antisemitism and Jewish Responses, 1932-40* (2015).

When delving beyond antisemitism alone, the racial ideas of fascist movements in the interwar period can provide insights into the distinctive nature of fascism in Britain, as well as its inherently racialised understanding of the country itself. The extent to which fascist racial ideas were adapted for the British context not only indicates the capacity of fascism to be ideologically intranational, but also highlights some of the underlying concepts used by British racial nationalists throughout contemporary history and the levels upon which individuals engaged with racial ideology. British fascist movements reached overarching common conclusions on the issue of race since outward incompatibilities were often caused by differing emphases, rather than major contradictions. Even so, interwar British fascist racial ideas as a whole were too

²⁴ BENEWICK, Robert, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, cit., p. 33.

²⁵ BAKER, David, *The Extreme Right in the 1920s: Fascism in a Cold Climate, or 'Conservatism with Knobs on?'*, in CRONIN, Mike (ed.), *The Failure of British Fascism: The Far Right and the Fight for Political Recognition*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 1996, pp. 12-28, p. 24.

²⁶ PAXTON, Robert O., «The Five Stages of Fascism», in *The Journal of Modern History*, 70, 1/1998, pp. 1-23, p. 17.

disparate to be seen as homogenous, especially when compared to the homogeneity of other racial ideas of the time, such as those of interwar Germany, which possessed the ideological unity of a single, authoritative, and vertically aligned fascist regime that involved an abundance of enthusiastic contemporary racial thinkers, unburdened of a need to win power or manage the racial “baggage” of a vast empire.

2. Domestic Racial Policy

Although domestic policy that directly focused on «the British, as a race» was generally scant, movements had different ideas about how to actively “improve” the racial stock of the United Kingdom²⁷. The IFL’s de facto programme for biopolitical government declared that «aristocracy should lead», but was extremely reproachful of the existing elite in interwar Britain, claiming that «it has begun to betray us»²⁸. The group believed that the indigenous “Aryan British” had given way to rulership drawn from “impure” and “subversive” racial stock, leading to the demand that «we have to restore Aryan rule in this country, Britain»²⁹. To achieve this, the IFL proposed putting Britain «in the hands of» a new aristocracy³⁰. Foundational IFL literature explained that «this future aristocracy» would comprise only «loyal Britons of British blood and breeding», being «untrained» in «the political corruption and moral unfittedness of the existing so-called aristocracy»³¹. With its hereditarian, essentialist understanding of race, the IFL’s domestic racial policy effectively advocated a radical, eugenicist drive to purify the blood of the ruling elite. This top-down eugenic drive stands in contrast with continental fascisms which heroicised the likes of German peasantry as the motor of racial purity under “blood and soil” ideas³². The BF’s programme for political reform included a similar demand to enforce rule by the «indigenous», «racially British» alone, explaining that ruling bodies such as parliament and the civil service should «exclude all those not of British birth and parentage from holding any public position»³³. As a more reactionary organisation, the BF stopped short of explicitly proclaiming systemic betrayal, but the policy still implied that the ruling elite of the time had been weakened by its proclivity for accepting “ethnically non-British” individuals into its ranks.

²⁷ MOSLEY, Oswald, *The Greater Britain*, London, 1934, p. 29.

²⁸ «God Save the King!», in *The Fascist*, cit., p. 1.

²⁹ LEESE, Arnold S., *The Destruction of India: Its Cause and Prevention*, London, 1935, p. 9.

³⁰ LEESE, Arnold S., BLAKENEY, Robert D. B., *Policy and Organisation of Imperial Fascist League*, London, Imperial, Fascist League, 1928, p. 4.

³¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 3-4.

³² MOSSE, George L., *Nazi culture: intellectual, cultural and social life in the Third Reich*, New York, Grosset & Dunlap, 1966, p. 134.

³³ SMITH, Robert, «Policy and Practice. (Provisional.)», 2 July 1926, URL: < <https://britishfascisti.blogspot.com/p/literature.html> > [consulted on 24 January 2020].

The BUF, on the other hand, embraced a heavily neo-Lamarckist approach to the domestic “British race”. The organisation wanted to «revive the vital breed of men on whom our past greatness has rested»³⁴ and had visions of the rule of «the true aristocrat»³⁵. To achieve this, the BUF proposed a kind of mass racial regeneration via «the advent of National Socialism», initiating a «rebuilding of the spirit» that could enable «our fellow countrymen» to «throw off their spiritual sickness, and march forward, resurgent»³⁶. The restoration of “spirit” could, under neo-Lamarckist theory, oversee a transformational change in the “British race”, since evolution could «move rapidly and by abrupt step», guided by the «human mind»³⁷. Man could thus be made «responsible for his own social evolution»³⁸. In clinging to transcendent conceptions of vitalism and spirit, the BUF could espouse a heavily emotional, but largely immaterial, perspective of domestic racial policy. To cement racial renewal in more practical terms, British eugenicists that inhabited fascist organisations also possessed «less grandiose interests in public-health issues»³⁹. For example, the BUF advocated a «huge nation-wide drive for national fitness»⁴⁰ and had a strong emphasis on physical culture – stances that were also commonplace among other groups like the BF and the Nordics⁴¹. The BUF view of eugenics and racial improvement effectively represented a rejection of racial fascism and social-Darwinist theory, favouring a more rhetorically patriotic narrative with focus on mystical vitalism rather than direct blood heritage.

British fascism also stood apart in its modernist visions of racial improvement, while continental conceptions of fascism rejected modernity for more agrarian interpretations of race⁴². Mosley’s visions of Britain’s future racial culture were intertwined with concepts of modernisation and a world «reborn through science»⁴³. Philip Coupland described Mosley’s “New Man” as the «product of an industrial society, an “instrument of steel” for an “iron age”», as well as a «modern technician»⁴⁴. Continental “blood and soil” fascism, on the other hand, was sceptical of modernity and urban culture⁴⁵. The domestic racial policies of British fascism therefore show its reactionary conservative roots, touting respect for institutions such as aristocracy, but also

³⁴ MOSLEY, Oswald, *The Greater Britain*, cit., p. 133.

³⁵ THOMSON, Arthur R., «Aristocracy of Worth», in *Fascist Week*, February 2-8 1934, p. 4.

³⁶ CHESTERTON, Arthur K., «Reawakening the Spirit of the British Race», in *Action*, 8 May 1937, p. 3.

³⁷ PFEIFER, Edward J., «The Scientific Source of Henry George’s Evolutionary Theories», in *Pacific Historical Review*, cit., p. 398.

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁹ STONE, Dan, «Race in British Eugenics», in *European History Quarterly*, 31, 3/2001, pp. 397-425, p. 404.

⁴⁰ CHESTERTON, Arthur K., «Reawakening the Spirit of the British Race», in *Action*, cit., p. 3.

⁴¹ ZWEINIGER-BARGIELOWSKA, Ina, «Building a British Superman: Physical Culture in Interwar Britain», in *Journal of Contemporary History*, 41, 4/2006, pp. 595-610, p. 609.

⁴² FISHER, Pamela, FISHER, Roy, «Tomorrow We Live: Fascist Visions of Education in 1930s Britain», in *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 30, 1/2009, pp. 71-82, p. 74.

⁴³ LINEHAN, Thomas, *British Fascism 1918-39: Parties, Ideology and Culture*, cit., p. 9.

⁴⁴ COUPLAND, Philip M., «The Blackshirted Utopians», in *Journal of Contemporary History*, 33, 2/1998, pp. 255-272, p. 264.

⁴⁵ KOONZ, Claudia, *The Nazi Conscience*, London, Belknap Press, 2003, p. 59.

expose where it diverges from conservatism, advocating revolutionary calls to embrace modernism and purify the blood of elites.

3. Imperial Identity

Despite the incongruity of social-Darwinist and neo-Lamarckist ideas at the basis of many British fascist racial ideas, all interwar British fascists shared a consensus that imperialism was fundamental to the identity of the «British race»⁴⁶. Alexander Raven Thomson, a leading BUF ideologue, declared, «we believe profoundly in our own British race which has created the Empire»⁴⁷. Similarly, BUF literature often referred to «the imperial task of the British race»⁴⁸. Fascist racial discourse routinely fell back on these imperial descriptors when discussing race, suggesting the symbiotic nature of the “British race” and Empire, to the extent that it was explicitly referred to as «an Imperial Race»⁴⁹. While other European fascists had an awareness of their countries’ colonial practices as apparent proof of a material expression of racial strength, it was British fascism, amplifying traditional conservative attitudes, that concentrated race and Empire into the defining characteristic of the race as a whole.

Amongst neo-Lamarckist fascists, the understanding that imperialism was a crucial attribute that demarcated the British as a distinct race was largely derived from nationalist German philosopher Oswald Spengler’s historical and cultural vision, with the belief that «the historical record was proof positive of the progress of the race»⁵⁰. In line with this view, Mosley explained that the Briton «knows that the foremost achievements of his race have been evoked in the vast work of Empire building», and lauded the purportedly evident «Imperial genius» of the “British Race”⁵¹. Neo-Lamarckist fascists like Mosley sought to underscore imperialism as a racial achievement, expressive of a characteristic propensity for sound rulership. Pointing at the historical record was sufficient rationale for these fascists to highlight the “quality” and distinctiveness of the British as a race without explicitly subordinating imperial “others”. The BUF idealised «swashbuckling imperial heroes»⁵², looking to a «masculine ideal based on the

⁴⁶ «Britons Awake! Join the Imperial Fascist League», in *The Fascist*, May 1935, p. 3.

⁴⁷ THOMSON, Arthur R., *The Coming Corporate State*, London, 1935, p. 35.

⁴⁸ BECKETT, John, «Cold Water and Carrots», in *Action*, 16 July 1936, p. 9.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁰ HUNDERT, Edward J., «Oswald Spengler: history and metaphor the decline and the west», in *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, 1, 1/1967, pp. 103-117, p. 112.

⁵¹ MOSLEY, Oswald, *Tomorrow We Live*, London, Mosley Publications, 1946, p. 115.

⁵² STOCKER, Paul, *Lost Imperium: Far Right Visions of the British Empire, c. 1920-1980*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2021, p. 41.

conviction that the best of British manhood could be found on Britain’s imperial frontiers»⁵³, implying that such figures embodied British racial ideals.

On the other hand, social-Darwinists, such as Leese, strongly criticised Spengler and other European nationalists «for seeing culture rather than race as determining human action»⁵⁴. Yet the IFL’s faith in the British Empire as proof of racial merit was not dissimilar to the BUF’s view, indicating a relatively consistent thinking about the imperial nature of the “British race” across British fascist movements⁵⁵. For example, the IFL used the historical record of British governance of India as an «outstanding example of the success of Aryan rule over a continent racially incapable of ruling itself», to evidence the supposedly natural British trait of imperial rule over races perceived as “inferior”⁵⁶. Likewise, the «historical overlordship exercised by Nordic Britain over Mediterranean Ireland» provided apparent proof that the mainland Aryan British were superior to the Irish⁵⁷. The social-Darwinist perspective essentially implied that «those nations which wielded the biggest sticks were therefore best by virtue of having been naturally selected»⁵⁸. For racial fascists like the IFL, the British Empire proved the biological superiority of the Aryan coloniser, while neo-Lamarckists like the BUF saw the British Empire as derived from a vital strength that fostered the development of “favourable” traits amongst individuals.

The amplification of such ideas in the articulations of British fascist racial ideas may be indicative of its proximity to reactionary colonial ideas, yet movements had the potential to push at the boundaries of such concepts when applying the thinking of individuals like Houston Stewart Chamberlain. William Joyce, for example, developed a «sophisticated fascist conception of Empire, which detailed how fascism and the British Empire were intertwined», including in terms of racial ideology⁵⁹. Contemporary observers such as anti-colonial writer George Padmore noted that British colonialism «was on the point of transmuting into a mode of fascism» – a metamorphosis that was at least partially realised in the formation of British fascist racial ideology⁶⁰. This view was derived from his warnings about a future «colonial fascism», distinct from the «classic fascism», that was unique to the «historical conditions of metropolitan Britain itself»⁶¹.

⁵³ LIBURD, Liam J., «Beyond the Pale: Whiteness, Masculinity and Empire in the British Union of Fascists», 1932-1940, in *Fascism*, 7, 2018, pp. 275-296, p. 276.

⁵⁴ THURLOW, Richard, *Fascism in Britain: A History, 1918-1985*, cit., p. 88.

⁵⁵ FARRENKOPF, John, *Prophet of Decline: Spengler on World History and Politics*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 2001, pp. 237-38.

⁵⁶ LEESE, Arnold S., *The Destruction of India: Its Cause and Prevention*, cit., p. 6.

⁵⁷ DOUGLAS, R. M., «The Swastika and the Shamrock: British Fascism and the Irish Question, 1918-1940», in *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, 29, 1/1997, pp. 57-75, p. 66.

⁵⁸ MCCONNAUGHEY, Gloria, «Darwin and Social Darwinism», in *Osiris*, 9, 1950, pp. 397-412, p. 397.

⁵⁹ STOCKER, Paul, *Lost Imperium: Far Right Visions of the British Empire, c. 1920-1980*, cit., p. 39.

⁶⁰ SCHWARZ, Bill, *West Indian intellectuals in Britain*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2003, p. 141.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, p. 142.

4. Approaches to Colonised Peoples

It was the idea of the imperial nature of the “British race” that shaped fascist approaches to colonised peoples. In the IFL, it led to a hard-line approach that was defended as «realism», contending that «the government failed to grasp the incapacity of all “coloured” races and their ability to govern themselves»⁶². The group fiercely argued that autonomy for indigenous peoples would subordinate the interests of “civilised” Britons to those of a race whose capacity for further development had yet to be proved⁶³. Leese separated races into «fighting» and «non-fighting» races according to their ability to survive honourably and engage in self-sacrifice⁶⁴. «Non-fighting races» within the Empire, such as the Indians or Irish, Leese said, «have no claim to nationality» and should «be happy under just Aryan rule, which should be absolute over them»⁶⁵. The «non-fighting or slave races [...] are despised, and rightly so», according to Leese⁶⁶. Under the IFL’s social-Darwinist logic, non-Aryan races could never stand on equal terms with the British, since their “undesirable” traits were fixed and transmitted by inheritance. As a result, the group advocated austere, explicit domination of other races within the Empire on the basis of purported Aryan British racial supremacy and effectively proposed a biopolitical mode of government that differentiated «worthy and unworthy life»⁶⁷.

Amongst neo-Lamarckists and racial non-essentialists, the imperial identity of the “British race” encouraged a more outwardly compassionate approach. The BF, for example, claimed to recognise the importance of different races within the Empire, which it described as containing «persons of different races, different religions, different laws, manners, customs [...] others are bound to us by flesh and blood and by material as well as moral considerations»⁶⁸. It was this ostensibly benign approach to colonial practice, rather than a hard-line view, that was expanded upon by the BUF, which claimed that «racial and religious persecution were alien to the British character» and thus «alien to British Fascism»⁶⁹. Mosley wrote on imperial race policy that «the British Empire is full of races different from ourselves, but we have never attacked any of these people merely because they are of different race»⁷⁰. Likewise, Thomson remarked that «we know also it would be bad for the Empire to stigmatise by law other races within it as inferior or

⁶² STOCKER, Paul, «“The Imperial Spirit”: British Fascism and Empire, 1919-1940», in *Religion Compass*, 9, 2/2015, pp. 45-54, p. 50.

⁶³ *The Fascist*, 10, 1930, p. 4.

⁶⁴ LEESE, Arnold S., *The Destruction of India: Its Cause and Prevention*, cit., p. 9.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 10.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 9.

⁶⁷ FOUCAULT, Michel, *Society must be defended. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, New York, Picador, 2003, p. 255.

⁶⁸ «The Wisdom of Disraeli.», in *The Patriot*, 23 March 1922, p. 12.

⁶⁹ BENEWICK, Robert, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, cit., p. 154.

⁷⁰ MOSLEY, Oswald, «British Rights and Jewish Interests», in *Blackshirt*, 3 October 1936, p. 1.

outcast»⁷¹. Notwithstanding overt British brutality in the likes of the Boer War, this selective perspective in the memories and articulations of British imperial policy enabled fascists to claim that even-handedness and tolerance were practical British racial characteristics.

The BUF's policy towards India exemplified this position. Thomson wrote that the «imposition of western culture on oriental life» would be a «mistake» and proposed that «Indians should be taught a higher ambition than to be a pale imitation of the West», even crediting India with possessing «an older cultural tradition than our own»⁷². Under fascism, he claimed, «Indian leaders will arise to carry forward their own traditions and culture within the framework of Empire»⁷³. BUF policy was ostensibly cautious to respect other races and cultures, but only within the existing rigid imperial structure and confines of established attitudes towards the colonies.

This stands in contrast to the IFL's view of India, which was characterised by disdain for native populations. The IFL identified «a faint Aryan Strain in some of the aristocratic families and in the upper Castes of Hinduism», but ultimately dismissed the composition of the entire country as «swamped by “native” blood of other races, and India is now a land of brown-skinned people»⁷⁴. Leese explained that the «Aryan blood of the upper castes and aristocracy has worn too thin to give them any claim to rule»⁷⁵. As a result, it was «absolutely necessary» to «put India once more under Aryan rule» and ensure domination «over all vital affairs of British India»⁷⁶. In such declarations, the IFL deviated from mainstream conservative discussions about the Empire, outright rejecting the romanticism of a «civilising mission»⁷⁷. Yet beyond this, many fascist arguments about the Empire appear to be fairly trite and did not differ greatly from mainstream political positions during this period.

Even if the BUF explained that the Empire was created «by reason of the British social sense and pride of race», rather than inherent Aryan superiority, there was an ultimate confluence of ideas about other races within the Empire⁷⁸. Generally, fascist rejections of autonomy for British colonial assets were couched in the same rhetoric as traditional jingoistic Edwardian conservatism, which argued that indigenous populations were uncivilised and unfit to govern themselves. Embracing this view, Mosley wrote that the BUF would:

Certainly pursue the steady course of British Colonial practice, which seeks by every means to raise native populations to a higher standard of life; but we will not pursue the illusion that

⁷¹ THOMSON, Arthur R., *The Coming Corporate State*, cit., p. 35.

⁷² *Ibidem*, p. 33.

⁷³ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁴ LEESE, Arnold S., *The Destruction of India: Its Cause and Prevention*, cit., p. 3.

⁷⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 9-10.

⁷⁷ STOCKER, Paul, *Lost Imperium: Far Right Visions of the British Empire, c. 1920-1980*, cit., p. 33.

⁷⁸ THOMSON, Arthur R., *The Coming Corporate State*, cit., p. 35.

great and productive areas of the world should be kept as a close preserve for races who are unable or unwilling to develop them⁷⁹.

He insisted that «the interests of the native population» were also «in the interests of the white standard of life»⁸⁰. Yet Mosley's fascism, retaining more liberal Edwardian imperial attitudes, suggested that good government and sound administration demanded the rule of law and even-handedness between racial groups in the Empire. The BUF's racism with regards to the Empire was ultimately «not too far removed from the official attitudes towards the colonies in the interwar period»⁸¹. Although Thurlow consequently termed the BUF's racism «relatively mild», it should be emphasised that the BUF's outlook fit into a broader racist political discourse established by Edwardian imperialists⁸². Racial imperial policy, which broadly remained in the domain of politically mainstream conservative attitudes, enabled the BUF to further its desired public image of political respectability, regardless of the severity and inconsistency of their racial ideas – regarding antisemitism in particular – amongst themselves. The idea of unwavering Aryan supremacy and subjugation of colonised races defined the IFL view, whereas the “civilising mission” and stewardship was key to the BUF's outlook. Both contained the same fundamental idea that the imperial tradition was proof of the innate governing qualities of the “British race” to justify rule over indigenous peoples. It was the outright respect afforded to other races which varied, but the colonialist result and implicit meaning was virtually identical.

Though BUF claimed that racial tolerance was a key British characteristic, with the Empire being presented as a collection of different but equally respectable races and cultures, in reality, the organisation's advocacy of respect and racial-consciousness for non-white races enabled it to push aggressively for a British ethno-state from a standpoint of “fairness”. It was this ethnocentricity that demarcated reactionary conservatism from fascist racial ideas in the BUF. The BUF insisted that «Fascist [sic] teaches pride of race and racial culture» for all peoples⁸³. In proclaiming its respect for other races, the BUF could distance itself from more aggressive conceptions of white supremacy while aiming to legitimise the idea of an ethnocentric British fascist state, even if this often did not practically translate to the overtly antagonistic actions of Blackshirts in public. This political technique is a demonstration of the BUF's strategic ability to «cloak themselves in imperial rhetoric and patriotic associations» to further its racial ideas, something that, crucially, it also did with antisemitism⁸⁴.

⁷⁹ MOSLEY, Oswald, *The Greater Britain*, cit., p. 146.

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁸¹ THURLOW, Richard, *Fascism in Britain: A History, 1918-1985*, cit., p. 16.

⁸² *Ibidem*.

⁸³ THOMSON, Arthur R., *The Coming Corporate State*, cit., p. 33.

⁸⁴ STOCKER, Paul, *Lost Imperium: Far Right Visions of the British Empire, c. 1920-1980*, cit., p. 35.

5. Antisemitism

While it is perhaps the most international element of British fascism, antisemitism was responsive to «domestic concerns as much as it was by continental ones», with distinctive approaches from different movements⁸⁵. In line with understandings of the imperial nature of the “British race”, fascists were particularly concerned about the threat that Jews allegedly posed to the Empire. This idea was first put forward by the BF, which believed that there were «cliques of subsidised renegades and aliens who are seeking to overthrow this Empire», but the group kept such rhetoric based around anti-alienism, inclusive of Jews, rather than explicit, virulent antisemitism⁸⁶. The BUF expanded upon this concept, explaining that «the two forces which assail the British Empire» came from «opposite bases – international Capitalism and international Socialism», which were apparently «discovered to be the twin rackets of the Jew, if not entirely, then to a very large extent»⁸⁷. When he served as the BUF’s Director of Propaganda, William Joyce, one of the more rabid and influential antisemites in the movement, bemoaned the decline of imperial values at the feet of mainstream political corruption and “parasitical” forces such as Jews who were said to be «decaying the Empire from within»⁸⁸. When applied to the British context, typical antisemitic concepts of Jewish scapegoating centred on the Empire in British fascist thought, even among racial non-essentialist groups.

The extreme antisemitism of the IFL dominated its thinking about the British Empire, declaring itself to be «conscious of the dark forces working for the destruction of the British Empire»⁸⁹. It was on this basis that the IFL claimed to be «Jew wise»⁹⁰. Leese believed that the «whole process» of the British Empire was «spoiled, contaminated and partly neutralised by the British power itself succumbing to the destructive influence of Judah»⁹¹. He specifically gave the example of India as a colony where «Jew Money Power» was conspiring «in the age-long struggle between Non-Aryan and Aryan, Destruction and Construction» to «destroy Aryan prestige in India», thereby «killing it» throughout Asia⁹². This vague claim was apparently «the object of Jewish politics applied to India» and, therefore, most other colonies, leading to demands that the

⁸⁵ STONE, Dan, «The English Mistery, the BUF, and the Dilemmas of British Fascism», in *The Journal of Modern History*, 75, 2/2003, pp. 336-358, p. 355.

⁸⁶ «Making Ready for Revolution.», in *The Patriot*, 8 June 1922, p. 8.

⁸⁷ CHESTERTON, Arthur K., «Truth About Jews», in *Action*, 7 November 1936, p. 7.

⁸⁸ STOCKER, Paul, «“The Imperial Spirit”: British Fascism and Empire, 1919-1940» in *Religion Compass*, cit., p. 51.

⁸⁹ LEESE, Arnold S., BLAKENEY, Robert D. B., *Imperial Fascist League: Policy and Organisation*, cit., p. 3.

⁹⁰ THURLOW, Richard, *Fascism in Britain: A History, 1918-1985*, cit., p. 62.

⁹¹ LEESE, Arnold S., *The Destruction of India: Its Cause and Prevention*, cit., p. 4 (original emphasis).

⁹² *Ibidem*, p. 6.

restoration of «British domination must be Jew-free»⁹³. As such, this form of British antisemitism was clearly more stringent than that of the racial non-essentialists.

Key to these aspersions of Jewish conspiracy was the suggestion the inherent good nature of the British Aryan prevented him from recognising Jewish subversion:

The Aryan mind grasps with difficulty the idea that any human race can have an instinct towards sadistic sacrifice, for the Aryan has himself no such instinct [...] it is his own good-nature which has largely been responsible for the Judaisation of mind which he himself has acquired by allowing Jews to control him for so long⁹⁴.

BUF publications similarly said that «the Jew’s great strength» was that he could «plot against the very Empire itself and the trustful Briton will not believe it»⁹⁵. Across movements, this explanation sought to justify the lack of evidence for claims of Jews working against the Empire and served as a somewhat backhanded reasoning for a general lack of antisemitism amongst British people.

In spite of these parallels, the BUF’s brand of British antisemitism differed from that of the IFL and other “Jew wise” groups considerably. As with his colonial policy, Mosley believed that the principle of tolerance resonated with the British public more than bigotry, explaining:

We British have not been in the habit of persecuting foreigners, and we shall not in the British Union develop that habit. On the contrary, we have a tradition of according good treatment to foreigners [...] Jews have certainly no reason to anticipate any breach of this tradition⁹⁶.

Mosley’s optimistic vision of British history and the attitudes of the BUF itself eschewed inconvenient truths to indulge a virtuous narrative of British patriotism that could claim to be non-discriminatory to Jews and other ethnic minorities. With a sense of caution that explicit antisemitism could be a needlessly divisive policy that risked alienating voters and potential members, the BUF made considerable attempts to shield itself from accusations of prejudice. BUF publications insisted that «There will be no discrimination and no persecution because of race or religion»⁹⁷. In the early years of the movement, the BUF newspaper *Blackshirt* claimed «We are not now and never have been antisemitic. We stand for religious toleration [...] We are against no Jew because he is a Jew»⁹⁸. The movement preferred to see itself as more akin to Italian Fascism,

⁹³ *Ibidem*, pp. 6, 10.

⁹⁴ LEESE, Arnold S., *My Irrelevant Defence: Meditations Inside Gaol and Out on Jewish Ritual Murder*, cit., p. 3.

⁹⁵ DORMAN, Geoffrey, «The Jew Question», in *Action*, 20 February 1937, p. 6.

⁹⁶ MOSLEY, Oswald, *Tomorrow We Live*, cit., p. 109.

⁹⁷ MOSLEY, Oswald, *Fascism for the Million*, London, 1936, p. 52.

⁹⁸ «The “Jewish World” Challenge.», in *Blackshirt*, 18-24 November 1933, p. 1.

where «the Jewish issue was unknown», and bristled at antisemitism as an «irrelevant» distraction from the true aims of the movement: «The Jewish question is no issue of Fascism, and the great case of Fascism should not be obscured by side-line or irrelevance»⁹⁹. Mosley understood that a Nazi-style drive towards negative eugenics, racial hygiene, or calling for the mass extermination of Jews would be detrimental to building a respectable and appealing movement, but privately he recognised that there was political capital in antisemitism, resulting in a fluid image.

The BUF was able to culture a strategic «home-grown» antisemitic policy that simultaneously promulgated tolerance in the British tradition but also heavily implied antisemitic rhetoric in «conspiratorial views of Jews controlling high finance»¹⁰⁰. BUF antisemitism was not rationalised as a hatred of all Jews, instead being presented as a crusade against conspiratorial forces, most of whom were Jewish by coincidence. With the BUF's neo-Lamarckist outlook, Jews on the whole were not dangerous, but there were said to be dangerous elements within the Jewish race:

Against the good Jewish citizen [...] there is no complaint [...] Let him go his way in peace. We only have to deal with the dangerous elements who prey and fatten on our people¹⁰¹.

Some admirers of the BUF were able to ignore antisemitism in the movement on the basis that all Jews, per se, were not targeted. But calls for protection of the indigenous population, criticisms of moneylending, and condemnations of shadowy «international finance» could easily be interpreted as targeting Jews by those antisemites attracted to Mosley's movement who saw the hidden hand of the Jews in everything. Historians have termed this strategy the «result of deliberate, tactical concealment»¹⁰². Similar «coded language» was also common among British eugenicists and is a key locus of debate around BUF antisemitism¹⁰³.

The BUF later claimed that in attacking international finance, Mosley unwittingly attacked Jewish financial power, a fact he did not become aware of until he found Jews the vanguard of anti-fascism¹⁰⁴. An article in the leading BUF newspaper *Action* derisively remarked, «The British Union attacks usury [...] Little wonder, therefore, that the inception of this new Movement aroused the hostility of our Jewish guests»¹⁰⁵. Chesterton similarly lamented the «sad irony» that

⁹⁹ «Fascism and the Jews», in *Blackshirt*, 1 April 1933, p. 1.

¹⁰⁰ LOVE, Gary, «“What's the Big Idea?”: Oswald Mosley, the British Union of Fascists and Generic Fascism», in *Journal of Contemporary History*, 42, 3/2007, pp. 447-468, p. 460.

¹⁰¹ REAVELY, Cuthbert, «Jews Who Are Living Lies», in *Blackshirt*, 1 March 1935, p. 2.

¹⁰² TILLES, Daniel, *British Fascist Antisemitism and Jewish Responses, 1932-40*, London, Bloomsbury, 2015, p. 63.

¹⁰³ STONE, Dan, «Race in British Eugenics», in *European History Quarterly*, 31, 3/2001, pp. 397-425, p. 404.

¹⁰⁴ CROSS, Colin, *The Fascists in Britain*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1963, p. 122.

¹⁰⁵ BECKETT, John, «Why the Jews Hate Fascism», in *Action*, 13 March 1937, p. 8.

the BUF had been «driven into racial policy» against its will¹⁰⁶. Mosley could forever claim that he was not an antisemite «by offering his own definition of antisemitism»¹⁰⁷: «I attack international finance in general, not Jewish finance in particular [...] We fight bad principles. We do not persecute individuals», Mosley argued after the war¹⁰⁸. As long as he condemned principles and not individuals, Mosley could claim he was not antisemitic, even if those principles were said to be mostly possessed by Jews. In shying away from absolute condemnations of Jewry and occasionally advocating religious toleration, the BUF was able to construct a British variant of antisemitism that focused on generating as much political capital as possible.

The IFL's hereditarian biological determinism suggested that different groups of individuals «constituted accumulations of healthy or degenerate biological entities», forming a clear racial hierarchy¹⁰⁹. Mosley's fascism, on the other hand, rejected fixed racial characteristics, but neo-Lamarckist evolutionary theory argued that amongst some individuals, «depletion of the vital forces would eventually bring increasingly degraded characteristics to the fore»¹¹⁰. This was, in effect, a theory of degeneration that could be freely applied to other races. It could be claimed that it was not racist to highlight an individual's “undesirable” racial characteristics since they were personal, and did not necessarily smear an entire racial group collectively. The neo-Lamarckism of the BUF could, therefore, be stretched to allow ethnic groups «with allegedly or actual non-European origins such as the Jews» to be «stigmatised as culturally different rather than racially inferior»¹¹¹. Social-Darwinist racism was rationalised on the grounds of “degenerate” hereditary attributes, while neo-Lamarckist racism was rationalised on the grounds of relativist cultural difference. The central conclusion was effectively one of racial hierarchy in which “lower” races were identified, offering similar capacity for racism and antisemitism.

British fascist racial ideology was shaped by the range of approaches from different movements, but it also generally had a significant role to play in the failure of each movement. The IFL's lack of impact, beyond its small size, was mainly due to the electorate's lack of affinity with virulent racial ideas. The IFL was comparable to the German Nazis in some senses, with Leese's aggressive antisemitism and social-Darwinist racial fascism making him «the nearest equivalent in outlook to an English Hitler», but there were «very different cultural traditions and values of British society compared with those of Germany» that marginalised the group even further¹¹². The British public simply had no patience with fictions of Jewish ritual murder or

¹⁰⁶ TILLES, Daniel, *British Fascist Antisemitism and Jewish Responses, 1932-40*, cit., p. 79.

¹⁰⁷ BENEWICK, Robert, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, cit., p. 151.

¹⁰⁸ MOSLEY, Oswald, *Mosley – Right or Wrong?*, cit., p. 133.

¹⁰⁹ LINEHAN, Thomas, *British Fascism 1918-39: Parties, Ideology and Culture*, cit., p. 27.

¹¹⁰ PFEIFER, Edward J., «The Scientific Source of Henry George's Evolutionary Theories», cit., p. 398.

¹¹¹ THURLOW, Richard, *Fascism in Britain: A History, 1918-1985*, cit., p. 18.

¹¹² *Ibidem*, p. 71.

claims that Jews had a collective «racial urge» for «human sacrifice» and «a decided instinct towards sadism»¹¹³. Indeed, Leese's radicalism was so beyond the pale that he had a perceptible disgust with the British people for allegedly having come under Jewish influence, going so far as to scorn various patriotic sentiments as Jewish instruments, such as the Union Flag, which was apparently «a flag of the Jews»¹¹⁴. It was the intensity of this hateful antisemitic racial ideology, to the extent that it contaminated every idea the IFL developed, that placed the group on the fringes of racial nationalism itself.

While the BF was undone by its proximity to the Conservative Party and financial arrears rather than racial ideas, it was not helped by a perception of impotence which led to a large number of defections. On the issue of antisemitism in particular, «some of the more aggressive antisemites» within the BF defected to found the National Fascisti (NF) in 1924¹¹⁵. Leese also left the BF in 1927 for the same reason¹¹⁶. Historians have claimed that BF was mostly «lukewarm in its attitude towards antisemitism»¹¹⁷. Where the organisation did drift toward antisemitism, it was of the «mild, non-doctrinaire type which excludes Jews from golf clubs, rather than the type which regards them as enemies of humanity»¹¹⁸. This was partly because the group was cautious not to upset its Jewish supporters in the Conservative Party¹¹⁹. For the hundred members who defected from the parent organisation of the BF, they did so because it was «neither sufficiently antisemitic nor fascist»¹²⁰. Racial policy therefore caused structural issues for the BF that set a process of wider fragmentation in British fascism in motion.

As much as it understood that racial ideas could be counter-productive, the BUF came to see racial ideas as an effective political weapon. It was this sense of political opportunism that underpinned the movement's ill-judged tactical shift towards antisemitism around 1935. The group often «fitted its ideology and political campaigns to the exigencies of local areas»¹²¹. This was the strategy for political antisemitism, where the BUF reserved «the manipulation of ethnic hostility and ethnic hatred [...] for those areas where it was assumed to have the greatest effect»¹²². The active shift toward political antisemitism has been characterised as an act of

¹¹³ LEESE, Arnold S., *My Irrelevant Defence: Meditations Inside Gaol and Out on Jewish Ritual Murder*, cit., p. 2.

¹¹⁴ «Empire Day Swastika», in *Nottingham Evening Post*, 24 May 1934, p. 1.

¹¹⁵ RENTON, David, *Fascism, Anti-Fascism and Britain in the 1940s*, London, Palgrave MacMillan, 2000, p. 12.

¹¹⁶ GRIFFITHS, Richard, *Fellow Travellers of the Right: British Enthusiasts for Nazi Germany 1933-9*, London, Constable, 1980, p. 97.

¹¹⁷ LINEHAN, Thomas, *British Fascism 1918-39: Parties, Ideology and Culture*, cit., p. 178.

¹¹⁸ CROSS, Colin, *The Fascists in Britain*, cit., p. 122.

¹¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 58.

¹²⁰ THURLOW, Richard, *Fascism in Britain: A History, 1918-1985*, cit., p. 54.

¹²¹ BREWER, John D., *Mosley's Men: The British Union of Fascists in the West Midlands*, Aldershot, Gower Publishing Company Limited, 1984, p. 112.

¹²² *Ibidem*.

destructive hubris prompted by the party's failures,¹²³ at a time when «Jewish influence provided the missing link between the otherwise disparate forces acting to undermine Britain»¹²⁴.

The outcome of Mosley's decision to campaign against purported Jewish interests in Britain was the decline of «his movement's short-lived public appeal»¹²⁵. This was partly because «the appeal of political antisemitism in Britain was quite localised and antisemitism could not be generated into a national issue», but there was a far more significant consequence¹²⁶. Rather than bestowing political advantages, the movement's side towards antisemitism backfired, creating «a strong link between the BUF and Nazi racist ideology in the eyes of the public»¹²⁷. Regardless of whether or not the BUF was «biologically racist» or if Mosley himself was a sincere antisemite, the BUF's rhetoric and imagery, as well as the behaviour of its members, «did little to forgo the impression»¹²⁸. As a result, «the movement found itself viewed as a pallid imitation of a foreign creed, rather than as an ultra-nationalist movement»¹²⁹. It simply did not matter that BUF members claimed that the movement «consistently expressed its disagreement with Hitler's “radicalism”» or that it was outwardly more moderate than the self-proclaimed racials¹³⁰. The BUF had become «one of those extremist movements», like the IFL, that was «outside the main experience of the British people»¹³¹. By the time the movement pivoted away from antisemitism towards a strong anti-war platform, «it was far too late to rescue its reputation»¹³². The perception of antisemitism, of Mosley as Britain's Hitler, and its links to German Nazism continued to besmirch the organisation even after the war when the BUF re-formed as the Union Movement.

6. Conclusion

In light of the appreciation that British fascism contained both social-Darwinist and neo-Lamarckist influences, the importance of evolutionary science in fascist thought becomes clear, as well as the significant influence of late Victorian and Edwardian racist thought and political

¹²³ MANDLE, William F., *Anti-Semitism and the British Union of Fascists*, London, Longmans, 1968, p. 34.

¹²⁴ LECRAS, Luke, A.K. *Chesterton and the Evolution of Britain's Extreme Right, 1933-1973*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2020, p. 43.

¹²⁵ RUBIN, Bret, «The Rise and Fall of British Fascism: Sir Oswald Mosley and the British Union of Fascists», in *Intersections*, cit., p. 372.

¹²⁶ BREWER, John D., *Mosley's Men: The British Union of Fascists in the West Midlands*, cit., p. 113.

¹²⁷ LOVE, Gary, «“What's the Big Idea?”: Oswald Mosley, the British Union of Fascists and Generic Fascism», in *Journal of Contemporary History*, cit., p. 460.

¹²⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹²⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹³⁰ BELLAMY, Richard R., *We Marched With Mosley*, Norfolk, University of Sheffield Library, 1968, p. 392.

¹³¹ GRIFFITHS, Richard, *Fellow Travellers of the Right: British Enthusiasts for Nazi Germany 1933-9*, cit., p. 108.

¹³² LOVE, Gary, «“What's the Big Idea?”: Oswald Mosley, the British Union of Fascists and Generic Fascism», in *Journal of Contemporary History*, cit., p. 460.

pragmatism¹³³. I have highlighted nuanced understandings of race from several self-proclaimed fascist organisations in interwar Britain. In doing so, I have shown that while movements articulated their racial ideas in different terms, there were clear commonalities when identifying the British as a distinctive racial group with an imperial identity and contemplating supposedly “non-British races” such as Jews, even if the exact form racial ideas took was fluid and the extent to which parties can be considered radical varied considerably. Indeed, the reconciliation of social-Darwinist and neo-Lamarckist ideas in a number of common conclusions indicates how fascists were able to mould ideology to the national context and their own prejudices regardless of specific ideological underpinnings.

Scholarship of British fascist racial ideas has often amounted to questioning the extent of antisemitism in the BUF. While it is clear that antisemitism was a key element of British fascism, other aspects of its racial ideas remain insufficiently fleshed out. There is more work to be done on the ideological divide on race between the «potential British Führers» that hindered closer cooperation¹³⁴. Understanding the importance of racial ideas in British fascist ideology is critical if one is to gain a better understanding of the “native” elements of fascist thought that are often overlooked in favour of more generic traits such as nationalism, imagery, political violence, and antisemitism. There is also plenty of room for more specific case studies, such as British fascist racial ideas on particular issues such as Indian and Irish nationalism, which dominated interwar imperial politics. Further discussion is required on comparative visions of a “British race”, such as that of reactionary conservatives, whose rhetoric at times was almost indistinguishable from that of fascists.

As Britain was not the only power at this time with a sense of exceptionalism, there is work to be done on how British fascist racial ideas compared to those of other continental fascist movements, particularly those that never established a regime, in a transnational analysis. The debate should be extended beyond the interwar period, where the presence of individuals such as Sir Oswald Mosley, A. K. Chesterton, and Arnold Leese remained. Did their experiences of the Second World War, the Holocaust, and realities of impending imperial collapse cause them to change tact on race? One could look even further at postcolonial and multicultural Britain, raising such questions as to what extent the distinctive character of interwar British fascist racial ideas remained in the likes of the British National Party at a time when the ethnic and imperial identity of Britain had changed unrecognisably, highlighting the through lines from IFL-style biological racism to the National Front or BUF-style cultural racism to Powellist ideas about immigration, showing the pervading influence of interwar British fascist racial ideas in later years. The

¹³³ FISHER, Pamela, FISHER, Roy, «Tomorrow We Live: Fascist Visions of Education in 1930s Britain», in *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, cit., p. 74.

¹³⁴ THURLOW, Richard, *Fascism in Britain: A History, 1918-1985*, cit., p. 85.

prevalence of racism across the British political spectrum, unconfined to any specific period of time, make British fascist racial ideas relevant to wider themes to be observed within domestic political culture. The racial ideas of interwar British fascists, while scarcely constituting a homogenous racial theory, may reveal much about the idiosyncratic and distinctive character of British racism.

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