

# **THE IDEOLOGY OF THE BRITISH RIGHT, 1918-1939**

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G. C. Webber

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Volume 8

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**G. C. WEBBER**

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*For my Mother and Father*

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## ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations have occasionally been used in the text, notes and bibliography.

### **(a) Organisations**

AGF	Anglo-German Fellowship
ASU	Anti-Socialist Union
BCAEC	British Council Against European Commitments
BCU	British Commonwealth Union
BFs	British Fascists
BPP	British Peoples' Party
BUF	British Union of Fascists
BWL	British Workers' League
CINEF	Centre International d'Etudes sur la Fascisme
EEU	Empire Economic Union
EIA	Empire Industries Association
FBI	Federation of British Industry
IDC	India Defence Committee
IDL	India Defence League
IES	Indian Empire Society
IEUG	Imperial Economic Unity Group
IFL	Imperial Fascist League
ILP	Independent Labour Party
MCU	Middle Classes Union
NCA	National Constitutional Association
OMS	Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies
UBC	Unionist Business Committee
UBI	Union of Britain and India
UEP	United Empire Party

### **(b) Publications**

APSR	American Political Science Review
EHR	English Historical Review

## *Abbreviations*

ER	English Review
HJ	Historical Journal
IER	Indian Empire Review
JBS	Journal of British Studies
JCH	Journal of Contemporary History
JMH	Journal of Modern History
NEW	New English Weekly
PS	Political Studies
PQ	Political Quarterly

### **(c) Dates**

Note that in the abbreviation of dates the British rather than the American system has been employed. For example, 3.8.22 refers to 3 August 1922.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

This book examines the ideas, and to a lesser extent the activities of dissident Conservatives and of Fascists in Britain between the wars, partly because the topic has been relatively neglected in the existing academic literature, but mainly because it contributes to our understanding of the Conservative Party and of the Fascist movements that existed during these years. It focuses upon the inter-war period because it was at this time that the Conservatives were forced to come to terms with a series of problems that highlighted internal disagreements and revealed features of the party that threatened, but failed to split the organisation on several occasions. It ends in 1939 because the events that culminated in the Second World War disrupted established patterns of right-wing politics and ushered in a period of uncertainty and confusion from which the Right were slow to recover.

Several important assumptions underlay the work. The first is that the study of ideas can and should contribute to our understanding of political behaviour since, although we must be cautious in assessing the role that political thought might play in shaping political practice, beliefs can be regarded as social 'facts' that help to invest political activity with 'meaning'. This is true even of Conservative Party politics. For although it is commonly claimed that British Conservatives are 'pragmatists' rather than 'ideologues', comments of this kind obscure the extent to which Conservative 'pragmatism' was an unintended consequence of attempts to reconcile similar but conflicting ideologies under the common umbrella of anti-radicalism, and they ignore the fact that right-wing Conservatives were characteristically concerned with questions of political principle.

There are, of course, objections to and problems with the study of ideas. One relates to general questions of intention and causality. To put it simply: we know that certain individuals expressed particular ideas because they happen to have left sufficient evidence for us to be able to reconstruct their views, but we can never be entirely sure how far these beliefs were related to their actions, nor how far similar beliefs may be ascribed to groups of people who



seem to have been in sympathy with them. Consequently, generalisations about the role of ideas can only be regarded as tentative. Likewise, presumptions about the relative 'importance' of different ideologies need to be considered carefully. To the extent that they failed to determine the legislative programmes even of the two purely Conservative governments between the wars, right-wing ideas can be and often are regarded as 'insignificant', but it would be wrong to dismiss them simply because they did not result in immediate or tangible reforms. Even 'rejected' ideologies are worthy of study, first for their intrinsic interest; secondly for what they reveal about the groups that propounded them; thirdly for what they can tell us about the political culture of which they were a part; and finally for the light that they shed upon related or rival ideologies and the organisations through which they most often sought and occasionally found expression. Just as the study of radical left-wing ideas contributes to our understanding of the Labour Party, so the study of right-wing ideas deepens our understanding of the Conservative Party.

A second assumption of the book is that one of the reasons for the weakness of British Fascism was the inability of the Fascist movement to attract large numbers of right-wing Conservatives away from their 'natural' party. Dissident Conservatives always constituted a potential reservoir of Fascist sympathisers, especially in the early thirties when Fascism was still regarded as a relatively 'respectable' alternative to liberal democracy, and it seems likely that disillusioned Conservatives were, in fact, the single most important source of support both for the small Fascist groups of the 1920s and for the British Union of Fascists (BUF) in the 1930s.<sup>1</sup> But even though a large proportion of Fascist sympathisers were disillusioned Conservatives, few right-wing Conservatives supported the Fascists and this fact appears to have been related, at least in part, to a complex pattern of ideological disagreements which the following chapters seek to explore in some detail.

A third and related assumption is that dissident Conservatives and Fascists can usefully be considered in relation to each other, and in the pages that follow these groups have been referred to collectively as the British Right.<sup>2</sup> This requires a few words of explanation. The vocabulary of Left and Right in politics is as familiar as it is imprecise. Historically, the terms are generally agreed to have originated with the French National Assembly of 1789 in which the nobles took the position of honour to the

President's right and their opponents sat to his left, but the distinction was soon generalised as a way of describing any two groups divided by a central cleavage, and by the 1920s, when the Labour Party had emerged as a major threat to the Conservatives, the language of Left and Right was beginning to gain currency in Britain.<sup>3</sup> Yet there has never been a consensus either about the meaning or about the proper use of these terms, and the result has been confusion. In everyday speech the words Left and Right are often used so loosely that they do not bear close examination; in academic works they are sometimes defined so narrowly that they no longer have much in common with everyday understanding; and even when abstract definitions have been formulated they have invariably proved inadequate as a method of establishing clear but meaningful limits to the subject under discussion.

Definition remains a problem. Self-designation is, at least in this case, a confusing method of definition because the term 'right-wing' has been used so promiscuously, and has so often been used as a term of abuse, that the end result is chaos rather than clarity. Definitions that focus upon institutional structures are also misleading because they tend to assume that parties, movements or pressure groups can be identified with one particular set of values, and although this is a useful piece of academic short-hand it is usually untrue. It is certainly impossible to define the British Right solely by reference to specified organisations (even though their existence and their aims may be useful *indicators* of ideological disagreements),<sup>4</sup> because the Right assumed a multiplicity of distinct but related forms and cut across the established boundaries between political parties. The most useful methods of definition are those that focus upon general values and beliefs, but even these have their limitations. Definitions that identify 'common ideological denominators' are necessarily abstract and are usually expressed in such a way that the 'denominators' identified either cease to be exclusive to the group in question, or cease to be useful as tools of empirical research. Furthermore, definitions of this kind tend to reduce ideologies to a list of 'essential' beliefs which disguise the fact that the *meanings* attached to words can and do change over time, and that it is the relationship *between* propositions that most often accounts for the distinctiveness of an ideology.

For all of these reasons, the British Right might best be understood as displaying a kind of 'family resemblance' that is difficult to 'define' in any 'scientific' manner, but which can nevertheless be

perceived, described and analysed. In broad terms, the Right can be characterised as a collection of anti-liberals who disliked socialism and despaired of official Conservatism with varying degrees of intensity. Most right-wingers were and remained members or supporters of the Conservative Party (although it follows from what has been said earlier that most Conservatives were not right-wingers). Some were on the fringes of the party. Others still were actively opposed to it, and many of these supported one or other of the fascist movements instead. Institutionally, the British Right were divided by competing loyalties; ideologically they were united by a common dislike of socialism (usually), liberalism (always), and (both invariably and bitterly) the kind of 'liberal conservatism' that was favoured by Baldwin and most of the Conservative Party leadership.

However, the genesis of these 'family resemblances' can only be properly understood in relation to a number of broad social, political and economic changes that affected Britain in the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the impact that these changes had, particularly upon the Conservative Party. The first concerned Britain's position in the world. From the early 1870s onwards, the British Empire became an issue of political importance and an object of ideological controversy. Between them, the unification of Italy and Germany, the emergence of economic rivals, and the renewed burst of imperial expansion in Africa, served to arouse both a pride in and a fear for the Empire. So momentous were the issues and the passions they aroused that these became the basis of a political re-alignment in the years that followed. With Disraeli's commitment to the imperial cause, the clarification of Gladstone's position, the related battles over Irish home rule, and the gradual absorption of the Liberal Unionists within the ranks of the Conservative Party, the re-alignment was complete, and by the turn of the century the major political parties appeared to have established themselves securely in their new roles. But elements of fluidity remained, not only because the Liberal Party (which had become increasingly radical) was soon faced with a challenge from Labour, but also because the new Conservative coalition forged by Disraeli and stabilised by Salisbury was beginning to experience serious internal divisions.

The most immediate, though not the only causes of this schism were the issues thrown up by the war in South Africa. The Boer War (1899–1902) raised doubts not only about the 'morality' of

British imperialism but also about the stability and defensibility of the Empire, the 'efficiency' of the army, and the suitability of the working classes for military service (almost half of all working-class volunteers were found to be physically unfit). In short, the Boer War provided a focus for anxieties about the Empire and the occasion for a break in Conservative ranks. In the years between 1900 and 1914 the creation of Patriotic leagues, the campaign for tariff reform, and the general orchestration of jingoistic sentiment served to identify the cause of imperialism less with the Conservative Party as a whole than with particular groups within and on the fringes of it. As Summers has argued, 'The Leagues' programmes and propaganda articulated a basic vocabulary of nationalism which set the tone for the British Right for decades.'<sup>5</sup>

It is interesting to note that some of the most ardent imperialists to be found amongst the nascent right wing were not originally Conservatives at all but Liberal Unionists such as Joseph Chamberlain and Lord Milner who, having become detached from the Liberals, now found themselves ill at ease with the Conservative Party as well. Like the Liberals from whom they had become divorced and unlike the mainstream Conservatives with whom they disagreed, these men regarded social cohesion as a product of conscious designs rather than a benefit of organic interaction, and this became a common theme of right-wing ideologies. Indeed, Chamberlain and Milner became the very symbols of opposition to official conservatism on a whole range of issues in the turbulent years before the First World War. Chamberlain was the hero of young Social Imperialists such as Leopold Amery and Henry Page Croft who were to continue the battle for tariffs during the 1920s and the early thirties, while Milner emerged as a champion of the Diehard cause in 1911, as a leader of the British Covenanters in the years that followed, as Chairman of the National Service League in 1915, and finally as a member of the War Cabinet that Lloyd George constructed in 1916. Milner's emergence as a man of 'the Right' was symptomatic of the way in which shared fears about the security of the Empire in the years between 1900 and 1914, allied as they were to anxieties about the House of Lords and Ireland, had helped to forge from a number of disparate groups a recognisable body of Conservative dissidents (usually referred to at this time simply as 'Diehards'). But his subsequent experiment with the British Workers' League and the renewed emphasis upon the 'social' aspects of his Social Imperialism after 1918 were a reminder