

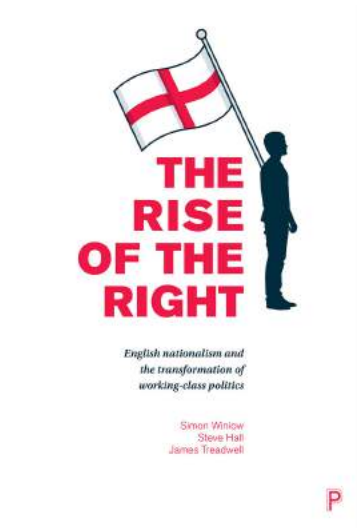
Book Review

What Drives the Rise of the Right?

Book Review of Simon Winlow, Steve Hall, & James Treadwell, *The Rise of the Right: English Nationalism and the Transformation of the Working Class*, Bristol: Policy Press, 2017. ISBN 9978-1-4473-2848-3 (paperback). GBP 10.39.

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What does *really* drive the rise of the right and of English nationalism among the working class? This is the question that this timely and extremely important book, written by three leading criminologists, seeks to answer. It does so by placing the emergence of the *English Defence League*, a fringe and disorganized political group of disillusioned and angry men and women, in an uncompromising political and socio-economic analysis. While mainstream media overindulge in bashing the evil figure of the uneducated, racist, homophobe and so on, white working class men and women who voted for Brexit, the British version of Hilary Clinton's 'basket of deplorables', thus further fuelling the anger of these men and women at the establishment, this book provides us with an in-depth perspective at how this resentment and often inarticulate anger emerged in the first place, and often with very good reasons – from loss of job security, low wages, growth of inequality, declining job prospects, downward mobility, to general degradation of working class neighbourhoods. While the book speaks of the English context, it is undeniable that the analysis is equally applicable elsewhere in the neoliberalized and deindustrialized West that has been driven into a state of economic and social decay by the political consensus between the neoliberal right and liberal left. As such, it should be an obligatory reading for anyone attempting to understand the increasing anti-establishment resentment against the self-serving elites across the West.



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While there is not much doubt that the destruction of the working class neighbourhoods and the devaluation of their inhabitants and their expulsion from cultural life can be to



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a large degree blamed on the brutal neoliberal policies embraced by the political establishment left and right, and in the recent times on the austerity politics, 'a kind of fetishistic self-flagellation imposed on the majority in order to guarantee that the super-rich minority were not inconvenienced too much, and could rest assured that with every passing year their wealth would continue to grow' (p. 20), as the authors themselves brilliantly analyse in detail, the question that emerges is: 'why have many white working-class areas become alienated from left-wing politics?' (p. 13). And this is the crucial question, from which the authors bravely do not shy away. Instead, they offer a much needed critique of the liberal left that has abandoned the working class hit hardest by the neoliberal reform, a left that has ceased to care for any true economic reform in the name of equality or for any regulation of the financial sector, and instead began indulging in pseudo-political culture wars and identity politics, completely disregarding people systematically pushed into poverty. To the liberal left, social antagonisms ceased to be economic and became firmly cultural – a fatal mistake. 'The political establishment no longer speaks to the experiences, hopes and dreams of ordinary people, and dismisses all their fears, no matter how grounded they might be, as irrational and counterproductive to the flourishing of progressive cultural life' (p. 2). It does not really come as a big surprise, given the actual existential problems people in working class neighbourhoods face on a daily basis (and increasingly also many beyond) that 'to these discarded workers the metropolitan middle class's posturing hipster communism and shrill identity politics is particularly galling. Thus eyes turn to the right, and the far right appears on the radar screen as the only alternative option' (p. 40). The tremendous sense of loss felt across these communities coupled with the total 'absence of alternative future', necessarily leads people to 'seek their own retrogressive escape route from the neoliberal market's unforbearing insecurity' (p. 27).

'The refusal of neoliberal media and academia to talk honestly about our precarious future intensifies this fear and creates space for conspiracy theories, the consolidation of pre-existing prejudices and the construction of various scapegoats' (p. 51).

The diagnosis of the current state of affairs is clear: unless the root causes of this anger are seriously addressed by the left, we won't witness any significant change in this trend. Instead, we will continue living in times of persistent post-political denial of the increasing insecurity, of denial of the loss of hope and of any future promise of betterment of the common man's condition, and of fear of precariousness and overall irrelevance and meaninglessness. 'The refusal of neoliberal media and academia to talk honestly about our precarious future intensifies this fear and creates space for conspiracy theories, the consolidation of pre-existing prejudices and the construction of various scapegoats' (p. 51). This refusal coupled with the increasingly obvious fact that the 'vital political and economic moves are now secondary to talk about discourses, narratives, intersectional identities, stigmatisation and so on' where the 'talk about real forces, structures and processes that create and reproduce our reality has been replaced by talk about talk' (p. 56), becomes the perfect breeding ground for the creation of scapegoats (that in my own view follow the very logic of identity politics) – such as the figure of the Muslim invader upon whom the EDL projects its fears and who effectively replaces the market forces that remain harder to grasp and challenge (and that few seriously talk about anymore). However, it is not only politics, as the authors argue, but also academia

that has become complicit in this counterproductive denial of lived experiences. As such, this powerful critique also directs itself at the academics, let me quote at length:

The crime-ridden communal degeneration and abject condition of specific pockets of former working-class residential areas in the UK is denied because supporting data is never generated and the liberal left don't listen to the everyday public discourse of the very poor people they are supposed to represent. Thus explosions of criminal activity and spikes in crime rates occur from what seems like nowhere, out of the darkness created systematic empirical manipulation and epistemological denial. (...) Those who gain access to impoverished neighbourhoods must always present a positive image of the poor – their altruism, sociability, resilience and sense of social justice. Hatred, inarticulate rage and examples of social breakdown and sheer desperation must always be presented as aberrations. Regardless of its rigour or quality, this type of appreciative representations is selected by the left-liberal media and academic research industries to receive the promotion required to compete with the right-wing demonization apparatus for entry into the public consciousness. (...) under no circumstance should either side portray the plight of some sections of the working class as unrecoverable within the current order of political economy, or the inevitable product of the political choice they both made to comply with the economic logic of neoliberal capitalist conjuncture. Avoiding clear representations of the inevitably deleterious outcomes of permanent localised recessions, permanent ejection from tenured work and the permanent removal of social status, both sides collude in the creation of an epistemological vacuum, into which the right-wing media flow to promote their ideological messages of voluntarist degeneracy, and the liberal-left media flow to promote the occasional small successes it manages to achieve in its generally unsuccessful philanthropic rescue mission (pp. 61-2).

The Rise of the Right can itself be read precisely as an attempt to counter this denial and to make us understand what has been happening on the ground, while giving voice to the EDL supporters driven by anger, frustration, sense of disempowerment and growing irrelevance and a nostalgia for the time when their labour was valued and considered important, a time when they were respected. Irrespective of how disturbing some statements may appear to certain readers, we need to hear them. While there is a sense of resentment directed at the Muslim Other, which can be discerned across the statements of the informants quoted in the second part of the book, the nostalgia coupled with anger at the current economic and social conditions of the working class clearly takes a precedence. The statements of the informants are always penetrated by deep anger at the system and the conditions they are forced to live in, let me quote several of these informants:

'I need to earn. I can't just sit waiting to get an hour here, an hour there... For Christ's sake, I'm not a kid anymore. I need a proper job' (p. 87).

'The whole thing is just set up to take the piss out of people like me' (p. 87).

'The place has been going downhill for years. (...) I moved away, obviously. That's how it goes. Why would you want to stay now? (...) I used to worry leaving my car parked outside of mam's. It's just all getting a little wild. That's all.' (p. 91).

'It's just, it's gone, hasn't it, that sense of community. (...) You've got drug addicts, you've got what, no jobs? No future for the kids? Growing up here now's not the best start, is it?' (p. 92).

'The politicians are just money-grabbing bastards mate, fucking liars and cowards. (...) They're just lining their own pockets, while places like this disappear. You never hear about this stuff on the news, do you?' (p. 92).

'The rich cunts in the city. On the TV and talking in the newspapers, calling us racists. It's not their jobs on the line, is it? It's not fucking loads of people moving next to them, is it?' (p. 95).

'I'm not racist, not really. Some things I think might come across as racist, but that's just because of the shit state we're in, isn't it? It's just gone mad, all that political correctness bollocks, the fucking thought police telling you what to think and that. I am just fucking sick of the immigration' (p. 97).

'Ten years from now it'll be all Muslim round here. All immigrant. They'll have the Sharia law, black flags everywhere. There'll be nothing left' (p. 99).

'UKIP is like a posh version of the EDL, isn't it? ... I mean, to be honest, I don't trust them. They'll probably fuck it up' (p. 102).

'...the fucking UAF and the cultural Marxists. They are just queers, dirty spoilt whores who like ethnic cock, and middle-class pricks that don't know what life is really like when you live on a shitty fucking estate where everything is disappearing except the fucking foreign faces' (p. 135).

'All I want is a bit of respect for our history and our traditions, a bit of respect for the white people who sweated their balls off building this country' (p.137).

Given their perpetual financial anxiety and the intensity of experienced existential problems, it is hardly a wonder that the frustration of these people is channelled at the wrong antagonist and not at the true causes of their frustration. However, it is the task of politics to begin channelling this anger at the proper cause, and to create a movement that can restore hope and alter the course in which we are heading. Instead, the white men have become to the left what the Muslims are to them – atavistic barbarians – they have become the only group that can be openly bashed, chastised and stigmatized. And if we carefully watch reality TV shows, we know that when people are presumed to be idiots (that's why they are invited to the show in the first place) and they are expected to reveal this on the camera, they always tend to exaggerate and really show us 'what idiots they are'. It is precisely such a dynamic that we are witnessing here. 'They talked of the "stupid lefties" who hated the working class. These "stupid lefties" turned up at EDL protests to shout and spit at them and call them fascists' (p. 117). Now they are certainly bound to show us what fascists they are, vulgarity and the ability to offend being the only resource left to them. Moreover, in the manner of contemporary dominant politics, they are 'talked down to, patronised, and treated like dull-witted pupils, who failed to absorb the never-ending lesson on cultural tolerance' (p. 118). It is

my experience that only few (masochists?) like to be patronized. The crucial point here is that ‘the working class was the recipient of the lesson, never its author’ (p. 118) and it is thus no wonder that ‘freedom, like equality and everything else these liberals droned on about, repeating their tired mantra over and over again, was ultimately a load of shit. It meant nothing, and it meant nothing because it was nothing’ (p. 120).

Instead, it is necessary to create a new type of politics that would render cultural differences insignificant and in their place identify new commitments that could be shared by all, irrespective of cultural background or whichever way people prefer to identify.

The final crucial question the authors raise is: ‘why has so much emphasis been placed on tolerating diversity and the creation of a just cultural order when so little emphasis has been placed on the creation of the just economic order we need to accommodate it?’ (p. 142). Instead, it is necessary to create a new type of politics that would render cultural differences insignificant and in their place identify new commitments that could be shared by all, irrespective of cultural background or whichever way people prefer to identify. Only new powerful, shared concerns and projects, as the authors argue, can potentially transgress these petty and ultimately insignificant divisions. Irrespective of how we identify, should not our enemy rather be the plutocratic global business class, whose interests it serves only so well that we keep fighting based on our silly identities in an attempt to either offend and be heard or gain moral high-ground? The new politics of universality, for which the authors plead, must take precedence, while ‘the “tolerance of diversity” must take a back seat’. In other words, ‘the acknowledgement of sameness must come to the fore’ (p. 182). This book deserves to be widely read and discussed. It is an incredibly rare intervention that has the potential to place academic work again at the centre of public debate and that, too, without fuelling further resentment of the working class. It’s call for a politics of universality is most needed in our times and we should all, upon reading, feel interpellated to act and mobilize against the destructive forces of capital that only benefit from driving us against each other, keeping us oppressed in our petty battles.

‘the “tolerance of diversity” must take a back seat ... the acknowledgement of sameness must come to the fore’ (p. 182)

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