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The Return of Mosley

by William C. Bader, Jr

Robert Skidelsky's recent biography, *Oswald Mosley*, is the best and most detailed study to date of the man, once a rising young Labour MP of the 1920s, who in October 1932 renounced parliamentary politics and founded the British Union of Fascists (BUF). Mr Skidelsky finds in Mosley's life 'an alternative history of Great Britain in the twentieth century'. Having observed the uncertain course of British politics in the 1960s, he has come to see Mosley, with his 'bold policies, unflinching courage, eloquent language, compassion, [and] popular appeal', as 'Labour's "lost leader"'. Mosley might have been the 'great peace-leader' which Britain never found, much to her loss and even shame, for one cannot but think the worse of a land which drove out the political genius necessary to reverse the 'political and economic decline' into which it had fallen.¹ So Mr Skidelsky believes that Mosley may best be seen as an 'authoritarian modernizer' in a society which resisted the adaptation of 'nineteenth century ideas to twentieth century reality'. His reward has been to be pilloried by the 'failing political class' whose complacent idleness he rejected, a vengeance which is 'both mean and unwise'.² It is mean because it is an expression of rancour not reason; it is unwise because Mosley's technocratic ideas have their relevance in the modern world and because Mosley possesses the essential qualities of a great political leader.

Such, in brief, are Robert Skidelsky's views. They are, in my opinion, seriously defective. Mosley could never have led Labour or any popular democratic party, and it is doubtful whether the authoritarian party he did control could have brought prosperity to Britain even if given the nearly total power it sought. He should not, therefore, be taken as the ideal political leader. As for Skidelsky's characterization of Britain as a society in decline cling-

ing vainly to nineteenth-century ideals while greatness ebbed away, this is a partisan denial of recognition of the virtues of the liberal democratic society which endured. Mosley had nothing but contempt for those virtues and saw them as further evidence of decline. There is no reason to repeat his error. Finally, his rejection of parliamentary politics did not come after he had been driven to desperation by the deafness of Parliament and party to his soberly reasoned arguments. Mosley turned against a parliamentary democracy which had prized his talents, because his background and values were antithetical to the system and so he needed but slight provocation to abandon it utterly. I will take up these matters in reverse order.

Oswald Mosley, 22-year-old heir to a 200-year-old baronetcy, with an impressive record of service in the world war, was elected to Parliament in December 1918 as Conservative member for Harrow. He was determined to build the 'land fit for heroes' which Lloyd George had called for and he became disenchanted when construction did not immediately begin. He quickly fell out with his own party (over the League, Ireland, and economics) but was twice re-elected in Harrow as an independent. In April 1924 he joined the Labour Party via the ILP. In October 1924, he challenged Neville Chamberlain for the old Chamberlain family seat of Ladywood, Birmingham, and came within a hairsbreadth of winning. No longer an MP, Mosley soon conceived his first comprehensive plan for solving Britain's economic troubles, the Birmingham Proposals of 1925.³ After giving active support to the miners in the General Strike, Mosley returned to Parliament in 1926 by winning a by-election for Smethwick. In 1927 and 1928 he was elected from the constituency section to the Labour National Executive. When Labour took office in June 1929, he was given a junior post outside the Cabinet as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. He was at this time only 32 years old, having risen with remarkable

William C. Bader teaches in the Department of History at Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts, USA.

rapidity because of his diligence and energy, his oratorical talents and his impressive grasp of complex problems, especially economic issues. Mosley's rise is a case study in the granting of position to talent.

But within barely three years, Mosley had renounced all position and real importance in British politics. His first action as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster was to formulate the Mosley Memorandum, a sweeping plan of economic action, both short and long term, which he submitted directly to the Cabinet over the head of his nominal superior, the Lord Privy Seal J. H. Thomas. Through his plan, Mosley sought to attack both the unemployment brought by the Depression and the causes of poverty, poor housing, unjust working conditions, and economic hardship in general. In March 1930, the Cabinet rejected the Mosley Memorandum.

A few words on Mosley's economic policy are unavoidable. Stated most succinctly, Mosley's mature thought combined rationalization, planning and insulation. The goal was a high-technology system in which production and consumption would be balanced through the supervisory control of a government over wages, prices and credit. The system was to function within a closed, self-sufficient, imperial bloc, not subject to the intrusion of world market forces (hence the term 'insulation'). Bloc insulation followed from Mosley's belief that planning could neither succeed on a narrow national scale nor be hoped for on a total global scale. In 1930, Mosley asked not for acceptance of this grand plan (which he had yet to formulate completely) but for loan-financed public works to improve conditions in the short run and concentration on a planned British home market (instead of world export markets) for the long run. He also asked for emergency powers to implement his policy.⁴ Whatever one thinks of the vision of a world divided into mutually exclusive economic and political blocs, there is little doubt that Mosley's 1930 proposals were far superior to the deflationary policies actually pursued, first by Labour, then by the National government.

Following the Cabinet's rejection of his proposals, Mosley resigned from the government. Many thought the better of him for having

done so. He presented his plan before a meeting of the Parliamentary Labour Party where he got a sympathetic hearing. But Mosley insisted on a division and lost, 210-29; few would go so far as to express no confidence in their own government and many were angered that he pressed for a vote. Mosley hit back a week later, delivering the greatest speech of his life before a packed Parliament and receiving a thunderous ovation at its conclusion. In October 1930, he took his plan to the annual Labour Party Conference at Llandudno, where he received strong and enthusiastic support for his programme but lost the vote to make it official Labour policy by 1,251,000 to 1,046,000 votes. This was actually a fine showing, especially since Mosley was elected to the National Executive, unlike his former boss, J. H. Thomas. But, far from being encouraged, Mosley decided that Labour was spiritually incapable of action, a judgment Skidelsky makes his own when he attributes 'the 1931 debacle' (the National government) to a Labour 'fear of power . . . rooted in the psychology of the underdog'.⁵

But Mosley left Labour not in 1931 after the National government but in 1930 after Llandudno, an important bit of chronology somewhat lost in Skidelsky's narration. After Llandudno, Mosley began trying to recruit his own party in Parliament. He had little success, but nevertheless launched his New Party in February 1931. Five MPs joined him; two resigned after one day. The New Party fielded 21 candidates in the general election of 1931; all lost and only two saved their deposits. After a year of thinking and travelling (to fascist Italy, among other places), Mosley decided that to re-enter either of the old parties was to don a 'strait waistcoat'. He had 'no desire for power on those terms'.⁶ So on 1 October 1932 he founded the British Union of Fascists, selecting the black shirt as his movement's official dress.

Mr Skidelsky's account of all this leaves the impression that Mosley, as a conscientious, clear-sighted man, could hardly do other than remove himself from a system incapable of responding to crisis. 'Mosley was right' is Skidelsky's leitmotif. But one must not forget that Mosley wrote off his own party's government because it would not adopt the economic

programme of a young, very junior minister who had not been asked to formulate it in the first place. He then rejected his Parliamentary party because it would not stab its own government in the back. Next he proceeded to discard Labour as a whole because it would not abandon its elected leadership at a moment's notice in favour of the rousing orator from Smethwick. This setback called forth a fantastic attempt to induce large numbers of MPs to abjure their party affiliation and follow Mosley in creating a New Party, the need for which was supposedly demonstrated by all that had gone before. When the New Party failed, he concluded that the whole political system must be rotten—only a fascist movement could save Britain. Obviously, Mosley's 'rightness' explains very little about his actions.

Strictly speaking, Mr Skidelsky *does* recognize this. 'Revolt against the flabbiness of politics and sham values of bourgeois life . . . not his rational economic policy or . . . rational considerations of success and failure' provided the 'psychological dynamic' of Mosley's fascism. The bonds holding him, a nobleman-warrior and not a bourgeois-politician, to ordinary politics 'had always been fragile'. Only 'his view of himself in the Labour Party as part of an army on the march' had held him, and this was destroyed by 'Labour's political betrayal of 1930-31'. The 'spirit of the trenches' then surged to the fore, and he and those like him decided to 'recreate that alternative society previously incarnated in the trenches and use that as a base for the political conquest of England'. Succeed or fail, 'they would at least go down fighting like men'.⁷

Skidelsky sees in the BUF that militarization of politics, society, and morality which is the basic desire of all fascism. But he never focuses on this fundamental fact. Firstly, it seems from his description that fascism could have been a purely rational decision. For instance, he notes that some societies are 'so impervious to change, so corrupt and oppressive, that revolution is the only rational (and moral) response', leaving it an open question 'whether this was true of the British political system in the 1930s'.⁸ Secondly, he suggests that, indifferent to success though it was, fascism could have 'succeeded': militarization *can* coexist with technocratic rationalization. Fascism attempt-

ted to fuse 'the quest for modernization and the revolt against its consequences'. Though 'the two dynamics appear quite incompatible', he thrusts them together, discussing Mosley's economic grandplan and 'technician's horror of needless destruction' side by side with the fascist psychology of 'the eternal *condottieri*'. He does not question whether *condottieri* and their 'heroic psychology' are what is needed to build a 'new civilization'; the problem is that by doing so they would put themselves out of jobs. Instead of concluding that militarization and modernization are as incompatible as they appear, he finally decides only that their fusion posed 'a dilemma which fascism never resolved'.⁹

Thirdly, Robert Skidelsky seems to admire Mosley's fascist struggle whatever its outcome. Thus he is wont to refer to Mosley as 'rebelling against a diseased normality' or as being 'destroyed by the very spirit of negation against which he fought so valiantly'.¹⁰ There is a grandeur in defeat which Mosley could never have attained had he stayed with Labour (though Skidelsky at one point says he should have¹¹). And finally, this biography never examines closely the exact nature of the fascist militarization of life, defining it negatively as a rejection of bourgeois hypocrisy, triviality, and softness. The fascist 'new man' was to be open, active, heroic, and hard.¹² But, thus expressed, one understands neither the real nature of fascist desires nor the fascists' precise objections to modern life.

Since the British fascists proudly claimed it was 'not a difference of methods or points of policy, but a difference of spirit'¹³ which set them off from the Parliamentary 'Old Gang', this matter is important. Three elements comprised the fascist 'difference of spirit'. Primarily there was *heroism*, the dogged, selfless heroism of the soldier-patriot. Military heroism served something above and beyond the merely personal: *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*. The rational, self-directing individual was replaced by the devoted soldier as the social ideal. The 'decadent' value-system of atomized society underwent corresponding changes. Heroic struggle involved a rejection of the self-seeking hedonism which utilitarian ethics posited as an empirical norm and enjoined all to practise. Instead of material self-

indulgence and complacent delight in creature comforts, there would be the higher, healthier joys of exertion in a great cause and against great challenges. Nothing was more repulsive than the petty, pleasure-calculating Benthamite. As Mussolini put it when asked to expound the significance of fascism in one sentence, 'we are against the easy life!'.¹⁴

Heroism was the master quality of the fascist world because all other basic qualities derived from it. Since the life of the hero was hard and since it was structured in terms of the peculiarly cogent military principle, it had a certain and unequivocal value. Since the hero acted not for himself but for a greater whole of which he was but a part, he gained the intimacy of comradeship and a sense of community made all the more definite by struggle against threatening forces. Heroism, certainty, and community—disgust with the individual and sensual, doubt as to one's significance in a world of moral confusion, and the desire to exchange merely personal existence for membership in a greater whole—such was the content and motivation of the fascist spirit.¹⁵ Clearly, modernization was at best an accidental object of fascist striving. During the BUF's antisemitic campaign in London's East End in 1936-37 all association between the two was lost.

Mr Skidelsky tries to play down the seriousness of Mosley's antisemitism. He believes that 'Jews themselves . . . must take a large share of the blame' for it, reasoning that the large number of British Jews who opposed Mosley provoked a fascist backlash. As a result the BUF let fly with admittedly 'spurious' charges of a Jewish 'world finance conspiracy', and claimed that Jews controlled the British economy, press, political parties, and above all foreign policy—they were allegedly conspiring to involve Britain in war with Germany.¹⁶ Mosley's solution to the Jewish problem—mass deportation of Jews to unspecified 'waste places of the world'—is tamely labelled as 'a complete *non sequitur*'—by which is meant that, as 'Mosley never gave any very clear reason' for this measure, he was probably not serious about it. Skidelsky cites evidence which shows that Mosley was not as extreme as some on the Jewish question, but goes too far in accepting the contention that

he did not attack Jews on either religious or racial grounds. This is hard to understand from Mosley (what does 'Jewish' refer to apart from race or religion?), and even harder from Skidelsky (who twice quotes Mosley as referring to Jewish 'racial passion' and also criticizes him for treating Jews as 'a single entity' instead of as individuals). He regrets that Mosley was not more moderate on this issue for 'it would have saved him from many bitter reproaches'. He evidently wishes to convince the reader that Mosley's antisemitism, though 'the greatest blemish on his whole career', was really not terribly important, being merely the product of 'intellectual and moral carelessness', for which he is now sorry. Why Mr Skidelsky thinks this is also difficult to fathom, since he quotes Mosley as writing in 1973 about Jewish responsibility for 'one of the greatest crimes in history', namely the Jewish 'drive to a Second World War'.¹⁷ This, of course, is the 'crime' for which Hitler decreed the destruction of the European Jews.¹⁸

Was Mosley's antisemitism really an accident attributable to 'carelessness' or was it not bound up with the nature of British fascism? Why did he commit almost all BUF resources to the 1936 campaign for LCC seats in the impoverished, largely Jewish, East End? Skidelsky says Mosley merely 'went to where his "natural" support lay'; he did not 'invade' the East End to 'stir up hatred against the Jews'. He resisted more extreme antisemites within his movement and held his men under a tighter rein than the Communist, Socialist and Jewish counter-organizers held theirs. According to Skidelsky, the violence involved has been exaggerated, and the results of the elections (fascists polled between 14 and 23 per cent for each of six seats) justified BUF activity by showing that it 'represented something substantial in the East End'.¹⁹

All this is beside the point. The East End campaign was a large-scale application of the BUF's strategy of confrontation. It was resorted to in a time of decline to restore the movement's faltering sense of purpose. Thus the BUF donned a new, black full-dress uniform for the occasion, seeking to bolster its feeling of communitarian oneness by a heroic onslaught on the 'Jewish' menace. The result

was month after month of vandalism, beatings, gang warfare and Jewish panic. 'Jewish parents trying to settle their children to sleep against the roar of fascist amplifiers outside the bedroom windows'²⁰ could not assume that Mosley's deportation proposals was merely 'a *non sequitur*'. If the BUF represented 'something substantial' in the East End, it was those people who took the opportunity to blame their troubles on the Jews. What should one think of the nature of a movement which sought such 'natural support'? And what of its leader? In the East End the ex-Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster shamelessly uncovered his latest programme for dealing with poor housing, poverty and unemployment—'The Yids, the Yids, we've got to get rid of the Yids!'²¹ Labour's 'lost leader' had wandered into the land of political unreason.

Skidelsky has 'set the personal life of Mosley in the context of the decline of Britain' not just to rehabilitate the BUF leader but also to suggest a remedy for contemporary Western society. By presenting his subject as 'an authoritarian modernizer' in a dilapidated and lethargic society, he has largely accepted Mosley's self-portrait as a man moved 'by the practical sense of the engineer who finds it difficult to leave by the wayside broken machines which he knows he is competent to mend'²²; in other words, as possessing the objective technocratic expertise needed to shape a complex world to human ends. By describing Mosley's fascism as 'rebellious against a diseased normality', Skidelsky defends the basic healthiness of the fascist spirit exactly as did Mosley, who found its faults 'on the right side' in their preferability to 'the religion of lethargy'.²³ Again, the old politician declares in *My Life*, 'to meet the social dangers of our age it will be necessary to evoke the heroic mood'.²⁴ It seems that 'the quest for modernization' can only succeed by and through 'revolt against its [spiritual] consequences'.

All evidence, however, indicates that these two principles are incompatible, even mutually destructive. The revolt against the spiritual conditions of modernity has always led away from technocratic reform into social disorder and violence. Mussolini led Italy from depression into defeat and Hitler led Germany from

depression into moral disaster and political dismemberment. Mosley's personal course ran from Westminster to the East End, a journey significant more for its direction than its extent. He was moving away from objective achievement and toward a psychological transformation of reality. He gladly exchanged a position of real importance with Labour, even of pre-eminence within the ILP of the 1930s, for purely personal satisfactions. He yielded to his desire for heroic struggle, comradeship and the power to command. 'The old soldier in me got the better of the politician', Mosley comments.²⁵

Behind this innocuous-looking admission of another 'fault on the right side' lies the danger of fascism in general and the weakness of Mosley's personality in particular. The capacity to be carried away by 'faults on the right side' into iniquities of the first order is the essence of both. Skidelsky frequently touches on this essence but accords little emphasis to the matter and even draws a conclusion against the facts when he proposes Mosley as 'Labour's lost leader'. Thus he presents fascism as split by antithetical impulses, to perfect and to destroy modernity, and yet papers over the chasm as 'a dilemma which fascism never resolved'. Similarly, he speaks of Mosley's idealization of 'political outlaws who gave him a bad name with the serious public',²⁶ and yet suggests that someone lacking the ability to choose worthy assistants could have been Britain's 'great peace-leader'. He describes Sir Oswald's contempt to cooperative, individualist politics,²⁷ yet makes him out to have been a great politician. He writes of British fascism as rejecting 'the whole concept of life on which the political system rests',²⁸ but believes the man who spearheaded that rejection could have led Britain out of 'decline'. Skidelsky cannot see that a man with whom the determination 'to go down fighting' outweighs 'rational considerations of success or failure' is not an 'authoritarian modernizer' but a Don Quixote.

If technocracy is indeed coming, it is to be hoped that men like Mosley will have little to do with it. There is no need for the Wagnerian 'final hero' who, in Mosley's interpretation, must 'forswear love' to wield the ring of

power, 'yield[ing] joy to serve destiny' and so 'striv[ing] greatly that higher forms may come'.²⁹ This latter type could never attain power in a liberal democracy. As Skidelsky says, 'the bonds holding Mosley to ordinary politics had always been fragile'; that they snapped is neither a marvel nor evidence of the 'diseased normality' of British society. Such men cannot hold power within a democratic political system based on a liberal, individualistic, hedonistic ethos. But this is not, as Skidelsky thinks, because it is only 'in conditions of breakdown that new movements . . . get their opportunity', nor because it is sometimes 'necessary' to stir the nether world to uproar . . . to get things done'.³⁰ Power within the existing system is not for men like Mosley: they have no wish for it; their only desire is for power in another system altogether. Mosley seeks to evoke 'the heroic mood', not just 'to meet the social dangers of our age', but for its own sake.

In a famous essay, William James expressed his hope that a means might be found to prevent modern man from being made soft by success, a means for uniting the excellences of struggle with peaceful accomplishment. In the fascist struggle Mosley sought but did not find a moral equivalent of war. The 'heroic mood' has never in the past stood united with a technocratic 'practical sense of the engineer'. It would be a mistake to suppose they might stand together in the future.

It is certainly possible to endorse Robert Skidelsky's call for an end to 'exclusion of Mosley from the contemporary dialogue',³¹ though only after realizing that he himself must bear the responsibility for his exclusion in the first place. But the image of Mosley as 'Labour's lost leader' must be rejected. He could not have led and did not want to lead

Labour. He wished to command, or at least serve in, a political army, and to deal with ranks, not with personalities. He wanted power on his own terms, which were not simply personal exaltation but a transformation of the political system. Neither Labour nor Britain lost a leader in Mosley because to enjoy his leadership Labour would have had to cease to be Labour, and Britain to be Britain.

NOTES

1. Robert Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley* (New York, 1975) pp. 16, 14, 21, 20.
2. Skidelsky, pp. 17, 18, 20, 21.
3. See Oswald Mosley, *Revolution by Reason* (Leicester, 1925).
4. See *HC Deb.* Series 5, May 28, 1936 (239: 1348-72); See O. Mosley, *Europe: Faith and Plan* (1958) for his later views.
5. See O. Mosley, *The Alternative* (Ramsbury, Wiltshire, 1947) and *My Life* (New York, 1972) p. 235; Skidelsky, p. 206.
6. From Harold Nicolson, *Diaries and Letters*, 3 vols. (New York, 1966), Vol. 1, p. 115 (19.4.1932).
7. Skidelsky, pp. 290-291, 21.
8. *Ibid.* p. 289.
9. *Ibid.* pp. 299, 303, 312-315.
10. *Ibid.* pp. 290, 21.
11. *Ibid.* p. 245.
12. *Ibid.* pp. 290, 299, 301.
13. From *The Fascist Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1935), a BUF publication, quoted in Skidelsky, p. 312.
14. Benito Mussolini, *Fascism: Doctrine and Institutions* (New York, 1968) p. 36.
15. See Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Society* (Michigan State U. Press 1957) and Ernst Nolte's *Three Faces of Fascism* (New York, 1965).
16. Skidelsky, pp. 381, 385, 391.
17. *Ibid.* pp. 390-391, 385, 386.
18. See Hitler's 'Political Testament' quoted in Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Chicago, 1961) pp. 257, 635.
19. Skidelsky, pp. 393, 409.
20. Colin Cross, *The Fascists in Britain* (New York, 1963) p. 154.
21. A fascist chant in the East End, quoted by Skidelsky, p. 404.
22. Mosley, *My Life*, pp. 73-74.
23. *Ibid.* pp. 24-25. Mosley speaks of himself, but what he says can be generalized to cover fascism as well.
24. *Ibid.* Preface.
25. *Ibid.* p. 303; he refers specifically to his allowing the new full-dress uniform.
26. Skidelsky, p. 18.
27. *Ibid.* p. 311.
28. *Ibid.* p. 290.
29. O. Mosley, 'Wagner and Shaw: A Synthesis', in *The European* (1956) pp. 55, 61.
30. Skidelsky, pp. 333, 479-80; cf. p. 155.
31. *Ibid.* p. 21.