Review Essay

Does Populism Exist?

Oswald Mosley and the New Party

Matthew Worley.

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. ISBN 978 0 230 20697 7 (hardback), £55. Pp. viii + 234; index.

The Rise of the Tea Party

Anthony DiMaggio.

New York: Monthly Review Press, 2011. ISBN 978 1 58367 248 8 (hardback), £65, ISBN 978 1 58367 247 1 (paperback), £14.95. Pp. 287; index.

Steep: The Precipitous Rise of the Tea Party

Lawrence Rosenthal and Christine Trost (editors).

London: University of California Press, 2012. ISBN 978 0 520 27423 5 (hardback), £48.95, ISBN 978 0 520 27422 8 (paperback), £19.95. Pp. viii + 297; index.

From the UK Independence Party to Forza Italia, populist incomers in democratic politics typically present themselves as challengers to the system itself as well as to its current occupiers. The implicit threat is that the wave of popular discontent which the newcomer has mobilised will be so powerful as to sweep representative democracy away completely. The threat is rhetorical, but it is not always empty. The Social Democratic Party (SDP), founded in March 1981 by a group of prominent Labour MPs, based its appeal on a populist rejection of a blocked political system dominated by two extremes - Left-dominated Labour and Thatcherite Conservatism. In its first twelve months, the party won two parliamentary by-elections and took 42% of the vote in a third; opinion poll ratings for the SDP/Liberal Party alliance peaked

at 50%. The SDP aspired to 'break the mould' of British politics; a contemporary joke had it that they were on course to do so, by replacing it with a one-party state.

Three recent books prompt reflections on populist insurgencies in electoral politics and the conditions under which they can make a lasting impact. Matthew Worley's history begins fifty years before the foundation of the SDP, when another group of high-profile Labour MPs responded to political stagnation by forming a breakaway party calling for a new style of politics. Unlike the SDP, Oswald Mosley's New Party never won an election; less than two years after its formation, having lost all its MPs at the October 1931 general election, the party dissolved into Mosley's new venture, the British Union of Fascists.

What was it about the conjuncture of 1931 that enabled the formation of the New Party - and its resounding failure? Can we identify connections between the New Party's populism and Mosley's eventual move towards Fascism? Worley's brief, densely-written and mercifully well-indexed book puts the New Party on the map, albeit as a political failure - but "a political failure that was nevertheless peculiarly resonant of its times" (p. 11). Worley's study does not underplay the complexity of the New Party and its milieu, but makes it possible to suggest some key factors in the party's rapid rise and precipitous fall. The New Party confronted a minority Labour government, seemingly powerless to address a growing economic crisis; the government was threatened from the Right by withdrawal of Liberal support and from the Left by the Independent Labour Party (ILP) minority within its own ranks. This gave the New Party's broad-brush critique of the 'old politics' wide populist resonance; Worley cites Mosley calling on society to choose between 'the right to live' and 'the right to blather' (p. 32).

However, the New Party was not simply a populist lightning-rod for anti-party dissent; if anything, the party's positive appeal was only too precisely defined. The party grew from a milieu of aristocratic dissent (Mosley was a hereditary baronet and a Labour MP), fuelled by

the contempt for the ‘old guard’ felt across Europe following World War I. It appealed at once to British imperialist interests and to working-class solidarity, proposing to transform politics using modern business methods and to transform business through centralised planning. The overall effect was a programme which could almost have been designed to appeal as narrowly as possible. New Party recruitment was no less idiosyncratic. Early recruits were drawn from the Conservative and Liberal Parties as well as from Labour - the ILP in particular; little united them other than dissatisfaction with their previous allies.

Worley persuasively relates the party’s anti-democratic tendencies to a broader rootlessness - almost a vocation for marginality. Lacking any implantation within the mainstream of political debate, Mosley ultimately had little around which to unite his disparate and discontented followers, apart from rejection of the democratic parties from which they had come - and by extension of democracy. This rejection rapidly became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Seen as a vehicle through which Mosley could act out his rejection of the political game, the New Party was understandably of little interest to any other player. Conservative Party leader Stanley Baldwin disdained to treat Mosley as a politician at all, dismissing him as “a cad and a wrong ’un” (p. 128). (Baldwin’s view may have been hardened by the experiences of his son Oliver, a Labour MP who briefly defected to the New Party before returning to Labour.)

Political insurgents, like social movements, have need of elite allies; lacking these, Mosley rapidly ran through the New Party’s resources (material, ideological and human) and was forced to look further afield. Worley demonstrates that the founding of the BUF in October 1932 was only the culmination of the New Party’s evolution towards Fascism; Mosley had met Mussolini in January 1932 and overseen a merger with other British Fascist groups in April, while Nupa, the militaristic New Party youth movement which would supply many future BUF members, had been launched as early as October 1931.

The capacity to attract elite allies is perhaps the key characteristic which saved the Tea Party from the New Party's fate. The history of the Tea Party, the main contemporary populist challenger in US politics, is marked neither by electoral failure nor - despite some early warnings - by a drift towards Fascism. Launched in 2009 following the inauguration of Barack Obama, the Tea Party is - or is seen as - a grass-roots populist insurgency, aiming to 'take back America' from an over-mighty federal government believed to be intent on imposing atheism, political correctness and socialism. Federal taxation, and purportedly wasteful or deleterious government welfare initiatives such as 'ObamaCare', are key symbolic targets; the 'Tea Party' label evokes the Boston Tea Party, while one popular back-formation has it that 'Tea' is an acronym standing for 'Taxed Enough Already'.

The Tea Party's successes have been achieved within and through the Republican Party; in at least some of its goals, the Tea Party has the enthusiastic support and assistance of elite Republican lobbying groups. For Anthony DiMaggio, the story of the Tea Party is the story of how these groups have worked through what only purports to be a social movement. DiMaggio makes use of the Chomsky/Herman 'propaganda model', situating the Tea Party as a case study of 'manufacturing dissent' (p. 173). He refers to the social movement literature, but uses it primarily as a checklist against which to judge - and disqualify - the Tea Party ("According to these definitions, the Tea Party falls short of being a social movement in *every* area" (p. 41; emphasis in original)). Although DiMaggio has carried out primary research among local Tea Party organisers, his framing of the Tea Party as a top-down 'astroturf' operation is unremitting; the chapter reporting his research is titled 'The Tea Party Does Not Exist'.

Faced with US news media's consistent overestimation of the Tea Party, particularly when compared with their failure to cover genuinely radical grass-roots movements, DiMaggio's polemical stance is understandable, but it represents a missed opportunity to use the tools of social movement analysis to understand the Tea Party - or, at least, to understand those

individuals who chose (and continue to choose) to rally to the Tea Party standard, whatever the role of elite influences in keeping the standard raised. Some sociological analysis of Tea Party sympathisers is offered, but the force of the analysis is blunted by DiMaggio's decision to treat a selection of 'intangible hegemonic forces' such as ideology as independent variables, alongside material factors such as household income. The effect of this methodological choice is to downplay the agency of Tea Party supporters in favour of that of media sources such as Fox News, held responsible for disseminating radical right-wing ideological perspectives.

Rosenthal and Trost's collection, the product of a 2010 conference at the Berkeley Center for Right-Wing Studies, takes a broader view of the Tea Party mobilisation, characterising it unproblematically as a right-wing social movement. Devin Burghart gives a detailed account of the main Tea Party organisations, tracing their connections with elite Republican circles on one hand and right-wing grass-roots groups on the other; the Tea Party can be seen as a bridge, and to some extent a meeting-place, between 'respectable' elite lobbying interests and a hinterland of Libertarian, conservative Christian, anti-immigrant and militia groups. Alan Abramowitz and Clarence Lo consider the Tea Party as a product of - and a contributor to - the long-term polarisation of the Republican Party, while both Martin Cohen and Peter Montgomery relate it to past attempts to dominate the party by the religious Right. Lisa Disch and Joseph Lowndes give sophisticated accounts of the relationship between racism and the Tea Party phenomenon, echoing Abramowitz's finding that 'racial resentment' and personal dislike of Barack Obama are strong predictors of Tea Party support. Melissa Deckman genders Tea Party support, noting that age and income are better predictors of Tea Party support among men than women; Tea Party women are not demographically differentiated from Republican women in general, but are more likely to be religiously observant. Lastly, the notion of Tea Party populism is debated by Charles Postel and Chip Berlet: Postel maintains that the Tea Party is not coherently populist, but a partisan conservative movement with a highly specific agenda, while Berlet relates it to the specific current of 'right-wing producerist populism'.

Like the New Party, the Tea Party can be understood in terms of political opportunities and framing transactions. In terms of the opportunities leading to the group's formation, both Postel and Disch persuasively present the Tea Party as a defensive mobilisation by groups who had - or believed they had - much to lose under Obama. Taking as her starting-point the seemingly self-contradictory slogan "Keep your government hands off my Medicare", Disch argues that a key mobilising dynamic is "white racial identification facilitated by liberal social welfare policies" (p. 142); which is to say, the key word in the slogan quoted above is 'my'.

Apparent political blockage, combined with threatened loss of social status, thus created a perceived urgent need to organise outside and against the political mainstream; this combination of factors was also experienced by the discontented 'bright young things' who founded the New Party, and by the first wave of disaffected recruits to the party. Once launched, however, the groups were faced with very different constellations of political opportunities, and their fortunes diverged rapidly. The Tea Party movement was rapidly - some would say immediately - instrumentalised by elite forces pushing for a realignment of the Republican Party and US politics more broadly, and shed or marginalised most of its more intransigent and idiosyncratic elements in the process. By contrast, the New Party was met with (justifiable) distrust and incomprehension; as a result, it lost most of those members and sympathisers who might have provided a bridge into mainstream politics, and built a new identity around the intransigence of those who remained.

Elite endorsement (or co-option) is also a key factor on the ideological plane. After considering the heterogeneity and the failure of the New Party, it comes as something of a surprise to note how wide a range of ideological themes the Tea Party draws on: supporters are as likely to be mobilised by opposition to illegal immigration or gun control, or by 'culture war' issues such as Darwinian evolution or gay marriage, as by the core tax-cutting agenda. The fiscal

conservative Right, which originally raised the Tea Party banner, was historically associated with social liberalism; nevertheless, association with the religious and nativist Right now appears to be acceptable. Nor does the purity of the Tea Party's populist opposition to 'politics as usual' appear to have been compromised, in the eyes of its supporters, by its association with well-rooted factions - and long-running battles of position - within the Republican Party.

Two sets of framing transactions are crucial here: those which group heterogeneous framings together by association with a single 'master frame' (in this case, that of the Tea Party itself), and those which associate an insurgent's political positions with the attention-grabbing novelty of a populist outsider. It seems that whether these can be carried out is more a question of political agency than of the actual heterogeneity - or novelty - of the positions involved. While Berlet's positioning of the Tea Party within the family tree of American populism is precise and persuasive, it can also be argued that populist is as populist does: the Tea Party can be classed as a populist phenomenon, not because it is a bearer of populist ideology, but because it successfully presents itself as an outsider, attacking the unaccountable machinations of party apparatchiks from a base rooted in popular mobilisation. Though DiMaggio is right to stress that this outsider status is as much apparent as real, the Tea Party's ability to adopt it - while retaining elite allies - is a key factor in its success to date. The New Party in its short life had a much better claim to outsider status, but never had the political resources to develop a coherent 'master frame' of its own to which a credible outsider labelling could be attached.

The fortunes of these two very different movements suggest a broader lesson for populist insurgents: before you denounce the entire system, make sure of your elite allies inside the gates. The most successful populist insurgencies are those which are pushing at an open door.