

BOOK REVIEWS

BUTLER, LISE. Michael Young, Social Science, and the British Left, 1945–1970. [Oxford Historical Monographs.] Oxford University Press, Oxford [etc.] 2020. ix, 264 pp. £60.00.

British policy guru and erstwhile sociologist Michael Young popularized the concept “meritocracy” and authored the Labour Party’s winning 1945 manifesto. He was the quintessential twentieth-century journeyman, comfortable summering with the Roosevelts at the White House, talking 1950s community studies with Daniel Bell and Thomas Kuhn at the Stanford Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, or championing the politics of the new 1960s “activist consumer” through the Consumer Association he helped to found. The challenge for any historian tackling someone with so many different professional lives is to tell a coherent story. Lisa Butler achieves this impressive feat in her well-researched, engaging, and compact study.

Michael Young, Social Science and the British Left is an overwhelmingly intellectual biography, focusing on the genealogy and reception of specific ideas and discourses. Here, such an approach is intended not only to contextualize Young’s extraordinary career through extensive archival research, but to advance a much broader argument, namely, that “a humanistic, communitarian, and family-centric strand of British political thought was expressed through psychology, sociology and anthropology” (p. 2). This effort to demonstrate the dynamic connectivity of the social sciences and progressive British politics in the mid-twentieth century marks an extremely useful contribution to the literature. At the same time, her depiction of Young as a prescient but failed prophet points to the missed opportunities of Young’s project.

The book’s six chronological chapters begin in the 1940s and end in the early 1970s. The first sets up the broader stakes of adapting Edwardian and interwar ideas of the British left – above all, guild socialism – to meet the exigencies of postwar society, while the remaining five are firmly embedded within specific institutions that Young worked at or helped to establish. Chapter One centers on the intriguing Conference on the Psychological and Sociological Problems of Modern Socialism held at Oxford in 1945. Young was not a significant figure at the conference. Instead, Butler uses a dispute between child psychologist John Bowlby and Labour politician Evan Durbin about the means and feasibility of thwarting political apathy and far-right radicalization to tease out Young’s emerging intellectual concerns about the need for a new, social sciences-inflected grassroots democracy.

Chapter Two shifts to Young’s time at the Political and Economic Planning (PEP) think tank and the Labour Party Research Department, where he worked on the Atlee government agenda between 1945 and 1950. Butler focuses on several research projects to argue that Young wanted to insert the individualist “human factor” into left-wing discussions about postwar planning. In doing so, she writes,

Young contended that “people worked best and were happiest when their workplaces, communities, and political institutions allowed for face-to-face contact, the development of personal relationships, and a sense of belonging” (p. 49). Young drew upon an interdisciplinary *mélange* of research to push this iconoclastic project, but Butler rightly concentrates on the industrial psychology of Elton Mayo (whose daughter Patricia worked with Young at PEP) as the crucial influence. Young, like Mayo, wanted to prioritize human relations in the workplace as a steppingstone from greater productivity and cohesion to the rejuvenation of democratic citizenship in a post-liberal world. Further, Young was an internal critic of the “bigness” he saw saturating social and economic policy at the expense of the “little man”, and threatening to derail the Atlee program at Labour’s postwar moment of opportunity.

Chapter Three turns to Young’s burgeoning interest in family policy in the early 1950s. Butler focuses on his unpublished Labour policy paper “For Richer, For Poorer” (1952) to argue that Young saw the future fortunes of the British left hung on “the preservation and cultivation of traditional ways of life” (p. 98). Chapter Four then follows Young’s time overseeing the Institute of Community Studies, which overlapped with his two most famous publications, *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (1958) and *Family and Kinship in East London* (1957). Young, Butler writes, developed an “intellectual and political project to emphasize the continuing relevance of the extended family in industrial society, and to propose that these networks offered a model of socialist citizenship, solidarity, and community not tied to formal employment” (p. 106). Butler’s telling gives the sense that “family” also operated as a diction or language in Young’s thought, and not simply a fixed argument, or a persistent lens. It provided Young with a vocabulary – and an audience – to intercede in extremely different policy areas, from housing to healthcare, high street consumption to economic planning. But Butler also suggests that Young’s interest in family was the response to a much larger, international “family-centric turn in mid-century social science” (p. 126), and she opens the door for other historians to investigate further.

The book’s final two chapters elaborate earlier themes of family-centrism and social-science thinking into the 1960s and early 1970s. Chapter Five places the Consumer Association and Young’s growing interest in consumerism within the same continuum of his abiding preoccupation with preserving family in industrial life, while Chapter Six turns to futurology and his involvement with the (British) Social Science Research Council’s Committee on the Next Thirty Years under the Wilson government, where Young positioned forecasting as a new way to integrate social science knowledge into the policymaking process amidst debates about the former’s continuing relevance to government.

Young died in 2002 but his name continues to circulate among contemporary policy wonks and political commentators. This is unsurprising in our post-2008, Brexit world given the attention that Butler shows Young devoted to inequality, deindustrialization, urbanization, *ressentiment*, and tradition. Yet, key parts of his oeuvre, such as *Family and Kinship in East London*, have become *déclassé*. Indeed, Butler’s study comes at a time of reckoning for historians of the British left, and of the social sciences, who are rethinking the power dynamics inscribed into canonical works, and

the sources of data they relied on to make their claims.¹ Some protagonists in this historiographical conversation have tended to probe the original survey data for alternative bottom-up narratives and they reconstruct discursive, “vernacular” histories. Butler identifies herself with a different track that fuses intellectual and political history to pinpoint the forgotten reception and impact of mid-century social science.

Butler also reconstructs the network dynamics that made this nexus of politics and social science possible, particularly in Chapters Two and Three, though less attention is given to Young’s insecure status as a “novice” amongst some sociologists. Young was not just an ambitious polymath but the archetypal “policy wonk” who thrived on his proximity to power. In staking out his independent career at the crossroads of academia and mass party politics, Young relied on his extensive contact book alongside his intellectual acuity. Butler is able to weave together the different layers of Young’s networking without going adrift into Wikipedia pages of prosopography. One interesting cameo that recurs through the book is played by the qualified expert-cum-MP. These were Young’s interlocutors at Parliament, the likes of Richard Crossman, Edith Summerskill, and Stephen Taylor, figures who feel regrettably absent today.

Butler’s underlying argument is about the impact of British social sciences on the left. Young shaped “the core assumptions, values, and responses that policy makers on the left took to social change” (p. 222). Read: sometimes this felt hard to square with the Labour Party’s persistent rejection of his ideas. For many of Young’s signature publications, such as *Chipped White Cups of Dover*, *For Richer, For Poorer*, and *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, were actually turned down for publication by the party establishment. Young also carried the self-image of a prescient iconoclast shouting into the wind, especially in many of the interviews he gave toward the 1980s, which historians now use.

This disconnect is unsurprising, given the fundamental rift that existed between Young’s focus on human motivation and the mid-century Labour Party’s focus on the “politics of production” (p. 155). Butler must grapple with Young as a conservative figure within the inner circles of the Labour Party: someone prioritizing “consumer democracy” and private enterprise, and promoting the politics of nostalgia for traditional family structures and community. The full version of Margaret Thatcher’s famous line in 1987 that “there’s no such thing as society, *there are individual men and women, and there are families*”, Butler notes, reveals “some common ground with the family-centric worldview held by Young and other sociologists whose work was rooted in the tradition of social administration and functionalist sociology of the 1950s” (p. 220). Indeed, Young is perhaps most interesting to the general reader as an internal critic of the nascent welfare system who operated at its intellectual nerve center.

For all of the extensive genealogical digging Butler does to recover the context of Young’s ideas, a question mark still hangs over the actual normative stakes behind his intellectual commitments. What to make of Young’s advocacy of Milton Friedman’s “negative income tax” as a replacement for the welfare state, for example, or, more

¹For a re-examination of *Family and Kinship in East London* along these lines, see Jon Lawrence, “Inventing the ‘Traditional Working Class’: A Re-Analysis of Interviews from Young and Willmott’s *Family and Kinship in East London*”. For a good summary of this historiographical reckoning, see the May 2022 forum in the journal *Twentieth Century British History*. It features sociologist John Goldthorpe – of the famous *Affluent Worker* (1968) study, which probed the concept of working-class “embourgeoisement” – in dialogue with historians about the latter’s critical reading of such sociological data.

crucial to this book, his concern about the corruption of social bonds and ‘natural’ family structures? I would love to have heard what Butler herself felt about such positions, none of which sound particularly progressive. Should we like him? This feels less of an oversight than a conscious decision to pursue a studied neutrality vis-à-vis her subject, and it should take nothing away from an excellent monograph. The reader is treated to a fascinating assemblage of texts and projects, which Butler ably transforms from an eclectic collage of think-tank thought into a compelling story about the promise and limits of social-science thinking in the policymaking process.

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doi:10.1017/S0020859022000682

The Cambridge World History of Violence Volume I. The Prehistoric and Ancient Worlds. Ed. by GARRETT G. FAGAN *et al.* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2020. xvii, 739 pp. Ill. Maps. £120.00. (E-book: \$42.00.)

The Cambridge World History of Violence Volume II. 500–1500 CE. Ed. by MATTHEW S. GORDON, RICHARD W. KAEUPER, and HARRIET ZURNDORFER. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2020. xiv, 708 pp. Ill. Maps. £120.00. (E-book: \$42.00.)

The Cambridge World History of Violence Volume III. 1500–1800 CE. Ed. by ROBERT ANTONY, STUART CARROLL, and CAROLINE DODDS PENNOCK. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2020. xv, 716 pp. Ill. Maps. £120.00. (E-book: \$42.00.)

The Cambridge World History of Violence Volume IV. 1800 to the Present. Ed. by LOUISE EDWARDS, NIGEL PENN, and JAY WINTER. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2020. xiv, 680 pp. Ill. Maps. £120.00. (E-book: \$42.00.)

Recently, the United States was again the scene of a number of brutal shootings, including the murder of nineteen children and two teachers at a primary school in Uvalde, Texas. On 12 June 2022, a German teacher was killed in a lecture room by a thirty-four-year old man in front of around a hundred students. Violence is, unfortunately, a core feature of human societies, from individual murder to mass murder and genocide. The debate on the role of violence, whether ancient civilizations were equally violent, whether violence/war also has a positive influence, and whether modern societies are becoming less violent still makes a lot of ink flow.²

²See, *inter alia*, Ian Morris, *War! What Is It Good For? The Role of Conflict in Civilisation, from Primates to Robots* (London, 2014); Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (New York, 2018); Azar Gat, *War in Human Civilization* (Oxford, 2008); Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (London, 2011); Margaret MacMillan, *War: How Conflict Shaped Us* (London, 2020); Walter Scheidel, *The Great Leveller: Violence and the History of Inequality from the Stone-Age to the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton, NJ, 2018); David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (New York, 2021).