

Beyond aesthetics

Sacha Hilhorst, Jack Jeffrey, and David Klemperer

It is now common to hear progressive strategists say, ‘The far right is incredibly good at...’ As discussions increasingly revolve around the threat of the far right, many have ascribed to their opponents enviable levels of unity and message discipline, as well as a mesmeric hold over the British psyche. This is not quite true. The far right is generally ill-disciplined, riven with disputes and abhorrent to a majority of the British people. But it is undeniably on the march. Far-right influencers have used new media such as TikTok, YouTube and Substack to discover new audiences. Meanwhile, Nigel Farage’s radical right Reform UK party is leading in the polls, benefiting as it does from a widespread sense of malaise and disaffection. The Labour Party is yet to come to a coherent account of its emergence, character and appeal.

One place to start is the popular ‘Yookay Aesthetics’ X account, which propagates the idea that today’s United Kingdom (the ‘YooKay’) is a degraded multicultural successor state to a once-thriving ethnically-homogeneous British polity.¹ With almost fifty thousand followers, it has a larger X audience than mainstream platforms such as *The Observer*. It posts an endless barrage of images and videos which seem to have been selected to hammer home a single, racist point: diversity equals decline. TikTok is rife with similar content. If this politics was once the preserve of far-right messaging boards, it increasingly feels like the tenor on much of the right and beyond. Some of shadow justice secretary Robert Jenrick’s video outputs are undeniably Yookay-inflected, as are Reform councillor Laila Cunningham’s pronouncements on balaclava-clad teenagers and knives hidden in playgrounds.²

These crusaders for another Britain project all sorts of anxieties onto regular people living their regular lives, as attested by a recent *Financial Times* write-up of the far-right blogger Curtis Yarvin’s visit to England. While driving through Croydon, Yarvin asked: ‘So is this what they call the YOOKAY with the Y-O-O?’ Looking at a multi-ethnic neighbourhood through his car window, Yarvin saw ‘the legacy of imperial decay’.³ This is telling, not of Croydon, but of the phantasmagorical Britain of some of the far right’s leading influencers, for

whom a glimpse of a faraway chicken shop suggests disaster on a civilisational scale.

Croydon's current role in far-right imaginaries as a supposed archetype of diversity and post-imperial decline is not its first brush with the far right. As it happens, it was once a hub of British fascism. Croydon's history encompasses 1920s *fascisti* and 1950s empire loyalists and frequent Oswald Mosley visits, before becoming home to the headquarters of the National Front at its 1970s height, as historian Daniel Frost details in this issue. Frost's piece shows the permutations of the British far right over time as lived in a single geographical area. It is also a reminder that, for all the symbolic association between the far right and ex-industrial and coastal communities, British racism and fascism have emerged from diverse geographies, as have the movements to oppose them. The everyday multicultural decried by the Yookay crowd spawns alternatives to and bulwarks against fascist mobilisation.

Pubs, too, have gotten the Yookay Aesthetics treatment. One recent post is a simple screengrab of a notification that The Goat pub in Enfield is now a Kurdish community centre.⁴ Another offers an uncaptioned photo of a British Asian bartender next to a couple of foamy, supposedly badly-poured pints.⁵ As Sivamohan Valluvan and Amit Singh argue in their essay on Farage, nationalism and the pub, pubs are a common reference point in nationalist imaginaries. When both the pub and the country are said to be dying, Wetherspoons comes to affectively serve as 'the sufficiently carpeted tomb of Englishmen.' But if the far right seeks to stake a claim to the pub, the left can also take inspiration from its everyday intimacies, not least in the country's history of desi pubs, and for the path they open to 'a politics of softer shared pleasures through which many people understand their own sense of a life well-lived'.

It is these big questions – what does it mean to live a meaningful life? why does the world look as it does? – that the far right promises to answer. Meme pages and short-form TikTok videos are but one part of this ecosystem of ideas. As Alan Finlayson and Jack Jeffrey outline in their conversation in this issue, far-right influencers have taken an innovative approach to genre, mixing self-help, gaming, politics and more. They produce long essays which promise a 'deeper understanding' of the world, as well as a rapid-fire memes which insinuate rather than explain. As Finlayson argues, the online far right has wielded the tools of digital capitalism, such as subscription models, social media engagement, parasocial relationships, 'to wage a cultural war against the idea and the practice of equality.' Far more than a mere social media dopamine hit, they offer quasi-intellectual analysis, countercultural excitement and community.

What of physical communities? Caitlin Prowle makes the case for a community-centric Labour politics. If digital politics are an important part of story, so is local

community action. Returning to her hometown in South Wales, Prowle finds that Reform has been involved in ‘community clean-up drives, grassroots sports and other traditional community organising tactics across Wales’. Such efforts are effective, and a tried-and-tested part of the radical right playbook. Exactly such local initiatives caused one sociologist who witnessed the rise of the BNP in Burnley in the 2000s to describe it as the ‘Banal National Party’.⁶ Sacha Hilhorst’s dispatch from Mansfield, also included in this issue, further underlines the loss of community amenities and subsequent declinism as a driving force behind the Reform surge, especially in post-industrial towns, where Reform presents itself as a community-minded political alternative. The party leans into a workerist aesthetic while serving slumlords, exploitative employers and fossil fuel interests.

In her afterword to this issue, Caroline Lucas highlights the importance of net zero as a dividing line – one of the areas where Reform is at odds with UK public opinion. But despite the current government’s considerable early successes in this policy area, it is yet to make net zero the lynchpin of a wider social democratic narrative. Instead, voters on the left who would be willing to consider Labour are being driven away. Some of this was inevitable as Keir Starmer’s Labour Party set about governing under severe economic constraints, but within the limited space afforded to it, the government has made choices that alienate large sections of its base. These choices include cabinet ministers’ continued acceptance of perks and freebies, the proposals to curb benefits, and most of all the government’s reluctance to take decisive action while an allied state commits genocide in Gaza.

As the political scientist Ben Ansell has calculated, Labour can afford to lose a considerable number of voters, but it cannot afford to shed on both its flanks.⁷ Should Reform-curious voters make the move while left voters remain reluctant to lend their votes to a government which has often touted its lack of regard for them, Labour’s path to retaining power will become very, very narrow.

As the pieces in this issue attest, the left is not condemned to a defensive posture. To treat Farage and the far right as merely a threat to be managed is to concede the field in advance. Instead, social democrats will need to be propositional. What should such an agenda comprise? The issue also features two essays that take up this challenge. Paul Mason considers what an anti-fascist social democratic politics might look like in a low-growth, zero-sum world. A.E. Snow meanwhile looks further into the future, sketching a social democratic response to the dilemmas of technological progress that might compete with emerging reactionary futurisms.

Social democrats must resist the temptation to retreat into rearguard gestures. What is needed is not another defensive crouch but the recovery of a politics of

conviction – one capable of naming the terms of a decent, good life and staking a claim to the future of Britain.

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Notes

- 1 <https://x.com/mythoyookay/>
- 2 Sophy Ridge, “People don’t feel safe anymore” says Reform councillor’, *Sky News*, 21 July 2025.
- 3 Jemima Kelly, ‘Sunday at the garden party for Curtis Yarvin and the new, new right’, *Financial Times*, 8 August 2025.
- 4 Yookay Aesthetics, <https://x.com/mythoyookay/>, 15 April 2025.
- 5 Yookay Aesthetics, <https://x.com/mythoyookay/>, post of 2 January 2025.
- 6 James Rhodes, ‘The Banal National Party: the routine nature of legitimacy’, *Patterns of Prejudice*, Vol 43 No 2, 2009, pp142-160.
- 7 Ben Ansell, ‘Don’t Make Plans for Nigel’, *Political Calculus*, 28 May 2025.