

# *Riotous assembly: British punk's diaspora in the summer of '81*

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## Riotous Assembly: British punk's diaspora in the summer of '81

Matthew Worley

Britain's newspaper headlines made for stark reading in July 1981.<sup>1</sup> As a series of riots broke out across the country's inner-cities, *The Sun* led with reports of 'Race Fury' and 'Mob Rule', opening up to provide daily updates of 'Burning Britain' as the month drew on.<sup>2</sup> The *Daily Mail*, keen as always to pander a prejudice, described the disorder as a 'Black War on Police', bemoaning years of 'sparing the rod' and quoting those who blamed the riots on a 'vociferous immigration lobby' that sought 'excuses all the time for the excesses of the blacks'.<sup>3</sup> The *Daily Express* wrote of a 'permissive whirlwind' wreaking havoc; the *Daily Mirror* combined coverage of 'Riot Mobs' with condemnation of a Tory government that failed to recognise 'real, deep and dangerous problems' rooted in housing, education and unemployment.<sup>4</sup> Britain was 'close to anarchy', the *Mirror* insisted, as it juxtaposed images of battered police and broken windows with a message to Margaret Thatcher: 'Save Our Cities'.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, the riots of 1981 did not occur in a vacuum. Nor did they mark the beginning or culmination of any co-ordinated social protest. Rather, the violence that gripped Britain's inner-cities from Bristol in 1980 through London to Birmingham, Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, Newcastle and beyond in 1981 was but a spectacular expression of tensions that had long-simmered in communities affected by processes of structural and socio-economic change. Indeed, the problems of the 1970s are well-known: economic

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<sup>1</sup> This article stems from a Leverhulme Trust funded project on 'punk, politics and British youth culture'. Thanks to John Street and John Street, who also worked on the project.

<sup>2</sup> 'Mob Rule Grips The Cities', *The Sun*, 11 July 1981, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Daily Mail*, 6 July 1981, pp. 1–2. The quote was from the Tory MP John Stokes.

<sup>4</sup> *Daily Mirror*, 10 July 1981, pp. 1–3.

<sup>5</sup> *Daily Mirror*, 7 July 1981, p. 1.

instability, industrial conflict, war in Ireland extending to mainland bombings and a sense of crisis embedded in political and media discourses that moved from optimism to declinism as the decade wore on.<sup>6</sup> Violence on the picket lines, the Notting Hill carnival riot of 1976 and irregular clashes between the far-right National Front (NF), anti-fascists and police formed part of a continuum of disorder. But the 1980s were just as tumultuous.<sup>7</sup> For all Britain's being reinvented as a financial centre geared towards the interests of the entrepreneur, Thatcher's premiership was book-ended by recession and disfigured by fierce industrial struggles and social unrest that culminated in the poll tax riots of 1990. Most disastrously, unemployment became endemic. Having remained relatively low for much of the post-war period, the number of people out of work pushed towards three million in 1981 (12.4 per cent), before peaking at close to three-and-a-half million and remaining high thereafter.<sup>8</sup>

The young working class were particularly vulnerable to the changes effected over the 1980s. Government policies designed to eschew commitment to full employment in favour of controlling the money supply and 'freeing' the market from state intervention and trade unionism ensured many were caught in a toxic combination of deindustrialisation, economic depression and political brinksmanship. Britain's black population, too, suffered disproportionately, fuelling already-strained relations with local police forces riddled by

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Christopher Brooker, *The Seventies: Portrait of a Decade*, London: Allen Lane, 1980; Philip Whitehead, *The Writing on the Wall: Britain in the Seventies*, London: Michael Joseph, 1985; Dominic Sandbrook, *State of Emergency: The Way We Were: Britain, 1970–74*, London: Penguin, 2011; idem, *Seasons in the Sun: The Battle for Britain, 1974–79*, London: Allen Lane, 2012. For interesting reassessments of the period, see Nick Tiratsoo, "'You've Never Had it so Bad': Britain in the 1970s", in idem (ed), *From Blitz to Blair: A New History of the Britain since the 1970s*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1997, 163–90; Colin Hay, 'Chronicles of a Death Foretold: The Winter of Discontent and Construction of the Crisis of British Keynesian', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 63:3, 2010, 446–70; Joe Moran, "'Stand Up and Be Counted': Hughie Green, the 1970s and Popular Memory', *History Workshop Journal*, 70: 1, 2010, 173–98; Lawrence Black, Hugh Pemberton and Pat Thane (eds), *Reassessing the Seventies*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> For two differing styles of overview, see Brian Harrison, *Finding a Role? The United Kingdom, 1970–1990*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010; Andy Smith, *No Such Thing as Society: A History of Britain in the 1980s*, London: Constable, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> James Denman and Paul MacDonald, 'Unemployment Statistics from 1881 to the Present Day', *Labour Market Trends*, January 1996, pp. 5–18. Note that measurements of unemployment rates were also regularly 'adjusted' over the 1980s to massage the figures.

racism.<sup>9</sup> Put together, youthful frustration, social disadvantage and racial tension coalesced to ferment a period of unrest that scarred the landscape of the Conservatives' promised 'new beginning'.<sup>10</sup>

This chapter concentrates on a cultural context of the 1981 riots. More specifically, it looks at the diverse ways by which British punk's influence dispersed into the new decade, suggesting its cultural processes continued to provide for pertinent social and political commentary even after its 'moment' was deemed by many to have passed. Of course, equal attention could be given to other cultural forms and to other mediums.<sup>11</sup> Reggae, for example, had long chartered the pressures seething in Britain's inner cities, with Linton Kwesi Johnson ('D Great Insohreckshan'), Benjamin Zephaniah ('Riot in Progress') and the MCs Roy Rankin and Raymond Naphthali ('Brixton Incident') producing notable responses to the turmoil of 1980–81.<sup>12</sup> Punk, however, is here examined for the claims often made by its protagonists: namely, that it offered a cultural form relevant to and engaged with the world of which it formed part.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The Scarman Report, commissioned in response to the Brixton riots of April 1981 that presaged the wider summer disturbances, recognised the police as carrying 'responsibility for the outbreak of disorder', citing prejudice and a failure to engage in community relations as integral to the sense of distrust that permeated estates up and down the country. Lord Scarman, *The Scarman Report: The Brixton Disorders, 10–12 April 1981*, London: Pelican, 1982, pp. 118–9. See also, John Benyon (ed), *Scarman and After: Essays Reflecting on Lord Scarman's Report, the Riots and their Aftermath*, Oxford: Pergamon, 1984; John Rex, 'The 1981 Urban Riots in Britain', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 6:1, 1982, pp. 99–113.

<sup>10</sup> This was a term used in the 1979 Conservative Party manifesto.

<sup>11</sup> Alwyn Turner and Graham Stewart are just two historians who have drawn from across the arts to find cultural complements to the prevailing moods and events of the early 1980s. See Alwyn W. Turner, *Rejoice, Rejoice: Britain in the 1980s*, London: Aurum, 2010; Graham Stewart, *Bang: A History of Britain in the 1980s*, London: Atlantic Books, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> See also, for context, William 'Lez' Henry, 'Reggae, Rasta and the Role of the Deejay in the Black British Experience', in *Subcultures Network*, London: Routledge, 2015, pp. 91–110. For Bristol, see some the tracks compiled on *The Bristol Reggae Explosion*, Bristol Archive Records, 2010, including 3-D Production's 'Riot' (1980).

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Johnny Rotten's saying the Sex Pistols were an antidote to the 'non-reality culture' of hippiedom, in Fred and Judy Vermorel, *The Sex Pistols File*, London: Tandem, 1978, p. 182; Steve Walsh, 'The Very Angry Clash', *Sniffin' Glue*, No. 4, October 1976, pp. 3–6.

## **Punk is dead/punk's not dead**

Defining 'punk' – be it in a cultural or a political sense – is contentious and problematical. In the UK, at least, punk's meaning was constructed as much from without as within, as music journalists, the wider media and marketers moved quickly to frame and decipher the look, sound, language and symbolism of the Sex Pistols, Clash, Buzzcocks *et al.* Simultaneously, debate soon raged inside punk and its associated cultures, primarily as competing interpretations made claim to punk's 'real' intent or disavowed its influence once any set definition became more restrictive than liberating. Depending on your preference or prejudice, punk could be read as a musical form, a fashion, an aesthetic, an attitude, a protest, a media-construed label, an anti-social gesture, a cultural moment or a lifestyle.<sup>14</sup> Politically, punk was claimed and denounced on the left and right before generating its own explicitly anarchist subculture. It also comprised many who rejected all and any political interpretation of its motives and substance.<sup>15</sup>

Despite all this, some defining characteristics may be discerned to give sense to the cultural initiatives generated in and after 1976–77. At the very least, punk appeared to challenge the rarefied echelons of popular music, inspiring agency and an impetus to 'do-it-yourself' that opened up youth cultural practice to anyone with an idea, an inclination or something to say. This, in turn, gave rise to a *modus operandi* driven by an opposition to any dominant culture or perceived status quo and an irreverent disregard for pre-established hierarchies. Punk set itself *against* things, be it other music cultures, the establishment, the industry, rock 'n' roll clichés, gender roles, class divisions, society and even itself once codes and expectations of what punk *should be* became fixed. Canons and icons were there to be

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<sup>14</sup> The best account of British punk's emergence remains Jon Savage, *England's Dreaming: Sex Pistols and Punk Rock*, London: Faber & Faber, 1991.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew Worley, 'Shot By Both Sides: Punk, Politics and the End of "Consensus"', *Contemporary British History*, 26/3, 2012, 333–54.

deseccrated, subverted and demystified; punk's first rule – it was sometimes said – was no rules. Finally, punk's oppositionism suggested it provided cultural expression for the disenfranchised, a platform and a space for the alienated and disaffected. In short, punk may best be understood as a cultural process of critical engagement; it began with a negation that enabled multiple forms of expression to develop across a variety of sites.

Accordingly, punk – in Britain as elsewhere – evolved in a variety of ways. First, between broadly 1976 and 1978, divergence occurred between youthful iconoclasts like the Sex Pistols' Johnny Rotten and wannabe pop-stars who rode the punk bandwagon. 'Punk', commercially at least, was positioned against the more palatable 'new wave', while those influenced by The Clash adopted a street-level sense of social realism that began to contrast with the artistically minded who informed what later became known as 'post-punk'. In between, a distinctly DIY-culture developed around the production of fanzines and records self-released or issued through small independent labels. Anarchy, over time, was transformed from a rhetorical device into practice, as embodied by Crass, Poison Girls and others; subcultural revivals began to flourish – mods, skinheads, rude boys, rockabillys – as punk scrambled pop's past to reconstitute its future. By the 1980s, therefore, it was possible to discern numerous punk and punk-informed styles, often overlapping but always fraught in their relationship to punk's starting point and their own perceived meanings.

### **Babylon is burning with anxiety**

There is not space here to dissect in detail the various political impulses that lay beneath punk's divergent diaspora. The objective, instead, is to briefly survey the different ways by which punk-informed musics engaged with or reflected upon the socio-economic, political and cultural pressures that provided the backdrop to the riots of 1981. The heightened

political climate of the time must be borne in mind. As well as Britain's own internal tribulations, the reignited cold war cast its shadow over the 1980s. Just as the 1970s had seen Rock Against Racism (RAR) emerge in response to an upsurge in racial politics, so the 1980s saw the revival of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) spurred by worsening international relations between the West and the Soviet Union. Simultaneously, the early 1980s remained a period of vibrant but sometimes disparate political campaigns generated by a cultural turn in politics that located 'new' spheres of struggle (race, gender, sexuality, youth, culture, language, leisure) beyond the socio-economic or traditionally party-political.<sup>16</sup> Dating back to at least the 1950s, these 'new social movements' gained momentum to infuse and cut across the binaries of left and right. Concurrently, the global economic crises of the 1970s enabled a 'new right' to combine free market economics with social conservatism in reaction to the liberal reforms of the earlier twentieth century. In amidst all this, punk's politics were bound up in – and arguably helped reveal – the shifting contours of British polity.

For those who continued to identify unashamedly with punk, the early 1980s brought the Sex Pistols' prophecy of 'No Future' into sharp relief. As is well known, the moniker of 'dole queue rock' sat uneasily with the class of '76; the spectre of unemployment formed but part of a far broader sense of disaffection cultivated in tertiary education and teenage bedrooms as much as on the streets.<sup>17</sup> But it rang true for many who adopted punk as it filtered into the provinces, particularly as recession began to bite and the cold war threat became evermore tangible. The election of Margaret Thatcher served only

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Kenny, *The First New Left: British Intellectuals After Stalin*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1995; Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Post War Britain: History, the New Left and the Origins of Cultural Studies*, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1997.

<sup>17</sup> Dave Marsh, 'Dole Queue Rock', *New Society*, 20 January 1977, pp. 112–14; Simon Frith and Howard Horne, *Art into Pop*, London: Methuen & Co., 1987.

to augment the Orwellian overtones evident in punk's dystopian vision, with a renewed emphasis on law and order becoming totemic of what Stuart Hall described as the Tories' 'popular authoritarianism'.<sup>18</sup>

As this suggests, many of the principal punk bands of 1980–81 had begun to shift attention away from the stifling greyness of stunted social democracy towards the deleterious effects of emergent Thatcherism. The likes of Blitz, Discharge, The Exploited, GBH, Vice Squad and countless others wrote songs and forged an aesthetic that depicted a country broken and violent. So, for example, Vice Squad's album, *No Cause for Concern* (1981), was reputedly titled after a Thatcher quote relating to growing youth unemployment. Their original label, Riot City, was Bristol based and named in response to the disorder that broke out in the city's St Pauls area in 1980. Others, such as the Abrasive Wheels from Leeds, wrote songs that dramatised the impact of unemployment and its accompanying ennui. 'Vicious Circle', from their debut ep, depicted 'forgotten youth' wasting away, sniffing glue, walking the streets, signing on.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, a steady stream of dole-queue songs emerged from punk's hinterlands over the early 1980s, ranging from the defiant (Action Pact's 'Yet Another Dole Queue Song', Emergency's 'Points of View', Newtown Neurotics' 'Living With Unemployment') to the fatalistic (Discharge's 'Society's Victims', The Exploited's 'Dole Q', The Partisans' 'No U Turns'). In between, government schemes were dismissed, as in The Exploited's 'YOP', and conspiratorial scenarios of unemployed youths being conscripted into the army became rife as the spectre of (nuclear) war loomed.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Stuart Hall, 'The Great Moving Right Show', *Marxism Today*, January 1979, 14–20.

<sup>19</sup> 'Vicious Circle' on Abrasive Wheels, *Vicious Circle* ep, Riot City, 1981.

<sup>20</sup> YOP was a reference to the Youth Opportunities scheme introduced by Labour in 1978 and extended by the Conservatives in 1980. For songs predicting conscription, see – for but a few examples – Abrasive Wheels,

Such tropes were mirrored in punk's visual representation. By 1980–81, the culture's aesthetic had become more raggedy; the once stylised apparel faded and worn, with battered jackets and boots serving as austerity-wear. Images of deindustrialisation repeated across record sleeves and posters: graffitied walls and urban dereliction combined to represent a desolate vision of the UK. Band names – Chaos UK, Disorder, UK Decay – sought to evoke the temper of their times as they decorated t-shirts, badges and leathers.

Appropriately, therefore, the riots of 1981 erupted just as the 'Apocalypse Now' tour traversed the country, showcasing four of the leading 'new' punk bands: The Exploited, Anti Pasti, Discharge and Chron Gen. Such bands were typically dismissed in the mainstream music press for their reductionist reading of punk. Their stripped down, sped-up, blunt punk rock rubbed against the experimental tendencies of much 'post-punk' and the arch 'new pop' favoured by most journalists at the time. But even the *NME* was forced to concede that the apocalypse bands appeared to connect with the events of 1981. Writing on 18 July, as the riots continued to rage, Chris Bohn noted how 'last week's Commons reports [on the riots] read like paraphrased [Sex] Pistol songs', comparing the image and rhetoric of the on-going tour to the 'anarchy [and] chaos' asserting 'its new reign elsewhere'.<sup>21</sup>

Not surprisingly, the riots of 1980–81 informed punk's cultural reportage to good effect thereafter. Just as the Notting Hill carnival riot of 1976 served as the backdrop to The Clash's first single, 'White Riot' (1977), so the events of July 1981 affirmed the social dislocation projected by 1980s punk. To take just a few examples, Discharge's 'Fight Back' (1980) had already insisted that 'Bristol's riots were a result of peoples' hatred towards the system' before Blitz's 'Nation on Fire', The Violators' 'Summer of '81' and The Straps'

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'Army Song', Chron Gen, 'Puppets of War', The Clash, 'The Call Up', Dead Man's Shadow, 'When Our Blood is Spilled', Killing Joke, 'Tomorrow's World', Subhumans, 'Who's Gonna Fight in the Third World War'.

<sup>21</sup> Chris Bohn, 'Premature Burial', *NME*, 18 July 1981, pp. 32–3.

'Brixton' provided further communiques from the front line.<sup>22</sup> The Exploited's *Dead Cities* (1981) ep, released just weeks after the riots petered out, even came wrapped in a sleeve compiling headlines from newspaper reports, while Chaos UK debuted in 1982 with an ep, *Burning Britain*, that appropriated the title of *The Sun's* reportage. Indeed, 'riot' became an ever more entrenched part of punk's lexicon – repeated in band names, song titles and utilised as a symbol of the youthful disaffection that punk claimed to embody. Or, to quote The Exploited's Wattie Buchan's reconciliation of punk and the riots:

Kids are fed up. If they've got nowt to do they'll do something stupid. Like vandalise or something [...] If kids go straight from school to the dole, it's not their fault is it? They cannae go out and get a job. The government creates boredom and there's no way you can protest about it [...] They never bother until something actually happens [...] Punk today is the backlash of reality.<sup>23</sup>

Closely related to the hard-edged punk bands resurgent in 1981 were those associated with 'Oi!', a term coined in 1980 by the *Sounds* journalist Garry Bushell to denote a punk-lineage that ran through The Clash's social realism to bands such as Cock Sparrer, Sham 69, The Ruts, Cockney Rejects, Angelic Upstarts and into the 1980s via the 4-Skins, The Business and others. Oi! was effectively the point where punk fused with the skinhead subculture and football terraces – its songs and imagery focused on local identities, youth cultural rivalries and on-going societal problems.<sup>24</sup> More to the point, it was a gig featuring

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<sup>22</sup> Discharge, *Fight Back* ep, Clay Records, 1980.

<sup>23</sup> Cited in Bohn, 'Premature Burial', p. 32 and p. 61.

<sup>24</sup> Matthew Worley, 'Oi!, Oi!. Oi!: Class, Locality and British Punk', *Twentieth Century British History*, 24:4, 606–34.

three Oi! bands that helped spark the July riots, as local Asian youths mobilised in Southall on 3 July to protest against the arrival of a large skinhead presence in an area with a history of racial conflict.<sup>25</sup> A pitched battle with the police duly began, during which the gig venue (the Hambrough Tavern) was burnt to the ground and a media-stoked moral panic centred on Oi!'s supposed fascist tendencies followed in the days thereafter.<sup>26</sup>

Of course, the first Southall riot of 1981 was a product of more than simply a gig. Local tensions with the police and NF were deep-set and had previously surfaced in 1979 when the NF's attempt to hold an election meeting provoked violent confrontation. It was The Ruts' Southall connections that fed into their depiction of a 'Jah War' and a society 'burning with anxiety' ready to combust.<sup>27</sup> Nor was Oi! inherently fascist or right-wing. Though young NF and British Movement (BM) members could be found among its milieu, it was a contested culture of various political stripes concerned primarily with questions of class. The Business, in particular, fused boisterous sing-a-longs with class-conscious social commentary that included the prophetic 'Work or Riot'. Infa Riot, too, produced a set that catalogued the frustrations of inner-city youth and predicted a violent response to problems of insecurity and inequality. For Garry Johnson, Oi!'s resident poet, '[The] real point of all these riots is that the middle class are terrified of the white working class and black working class teaming up and fighting the system instead of each other, and that's the message Oi! MUST promote'.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Dave Renton, *When We Touched the Sky: The Anti-Nazi League, 1977–81*, London: New Clarion Press, 2006, pp. 136–55.

<sup>26</sup> Paul Donovan and Pat Evans, 'Exposed: The Racist Thug on the Cover of this Evil Record', *Daily Mail*, 10 July 1981, p. 3; Lucy Hodges, 'Racists Recruit Youth Through Rock Music', *The Times*, 3 August 1981, p. 3; Mick Duffy, 'Playing with Fire – And Other Skin Problems', *NME*, 11 July 1981, pp. 4–5; Joanna Rollo, 'Sounds Familiar', *Socialist Worker*, 18 July 1981, p. 4.

<sup>27</sup> 'Jah War', an account of the 1979 Southall riot and released as a single the same year. The other quote is from 'Babylon's Burning', released as a single earlier in 1979. Both records came out on Virgin..

<sup>28</sup> Garry Johnson, *Sounds*, 25 July 1981, p. 33.

Johnson's plea had already found expression in 2-tone, a fusion of punk and ska that first came to prominence in 1979. As is well-known, The Specials' 'Ghost Town' was number one in July 1981, the song's depiction of a British inner-city blighted by depression providing a resonant soundtrack to a summer of riotous disorder. As the clubs closed and jobs disappeared, so the people got angry and violence ensued. In fact, such topics had long informed the lyrics of 2-tone's more 'conscious' bands. The Specials, The Beat and The Selecter all released singles and albums in 1979–80 that comprised commentary on Britain's deepening malaise, their dance-friendly, up-tempo rhythms enveloping lyrics about racism, violence, unemployment and social dislocation.<sup>29</sup>

Surprisingly, perhaps, punk's most overtly political strand passed little direct comment on the 1981 riots. Crass, who paved the way for what eventually became known as 'anarcho-punk', were somewhat dismissive. Talking to *Anarchy*, the band were quoted as having described the disturbances as 'a glorified demonstration of misguided street-fighting ideology', an example of 'people being pissed off being told to buy Seiko watches and not being able to afford them'.<sup>30</sup> Yet, the concerns of Crass and many of those formed in their wake tended towards demystifying the underlying structures of 'the system' rather than reporting on specific events or instances. To this end, as the band's Penny Rimbaud pointed out in a letter to *Sounds* in January 1983, the riots were symptomatic of a far more deep-seated concern: they represented 'the discontent of the poor, who are expected to live on less and less' as the war state repressed the population and the ruling elite accrued ever greater wealth.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> The Selecter made direct reference the riots on their 'Bristol and Miami', on *Celebrate the Bullet*, Chrysalis Records, 1981.

<sup>30</sup> 'Crass', *Anarchy*, No. 34, 1981, pp. 4–5.

<sup>31</sup> George Berger, *The Story of Crass*, London: Omnibus Press, 2006, pp. 230–33.

There were exceptions. The Apostles – alongside anarchist ‘zines such as *Pigs for Slaughter* – celebrated street-level disorder, criticising both Crass’ pacifism and those who posed by anarchy signs while ‘in Toxteth + Moss Side, kids even younger than themselves hurl petrol bombs at police’.<sup>32</sup> Krondstadt Uprising, from Southend, also wrote ‘Receiver Deceiver’ in response to the riots, accusing the police of covering up the root causes of the disturbances behind misinformation.<sup>33</sup> More generally, however, anarcho-punk’s trajectory led away from the urbanism that incubated the frustrations vent in 1981. Not only was the idea of gainful employment rejected as a fallacy, but the pressures of the city were soon replaced by a yearning for the bucolic existence exemplified by Crass’ own Dial House near Epping and, later, the traveller convoys of the mid-1980s.<sup>34</sup>

Similar themes were apparent in the industrial culture associated with Throbbing Gristle, Cabaret Voltaire and others. Emerging parallel with punk and distinguished by its embrace of harsh electronic textures and tape cut-ups, industrial music fixated on the darker corners of the human psyche and those systems of control that constructed ‘reality’. Murder, sexual fetish and the abject featured heavily, alongside dissections of such forces as the media, religion and politics that imposed socio-cultural and political power relations.<sup>35</sup> Even so, Andy Gill’s review of Cabaret Voltaire’s *Red Mecca* (1981), ostensibly a record about global religious tensions, was written just as news of the Brixton riots broke. With perfect synchronicity, Gill noted, the record’s coarse dance beats provided a ‘chilling musical

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<sup>32</sup> ‘Why Punk is a Total Failure’, undated flyer, circa 1982; *Pigs for Slaughter*, pilot issue, 1981, pp. 6–9.

<sup>33</sup> The track appeared on the *Bullshit Detector Two* compilation issued on Crass Records in 1982. See also A-Heads’ ‘No Rule’ on *Wessex ’82*, Blurg, 1982, which evokes the riots of Bristol and Brixton.

<sup>34</sup> George McKay, *Senseless Acts of Beauty: Cultures of Resistance since the Sixties*, London: Verso, 1996.

<sup>35</sup> S. Alexander Reed, *Assimilate: A Critical History of Industrial Music*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

representation of '80s Britain [...] dance-as-riot [...] the two activities inseparable parts of a wider lust for freedom and expression'.<sup>36</sup>

Ultimately, therefore, punk's propensity to social commentary and cultural critique provided an enveloping context to the upheavals of 1980–81. Across its divergent forms, punk railed against the repressive pillars of 'the system'; it unpicked the alienating effects of commodification, work and media saturation. This was often instinctive, visceral – a politics of boredom. Simultaneously, punk's politics could be explicit. From as early as 1976, young activists had recognised punk's radical potential, be it via the social realism of The Clash or the opportunity to challenge social and cultural convention ushered in by the Sex Pistols. Beyond RAR's attempt to direct punk's cultural politics, a broader 'libertarian left' influence can be discerned in punk and 'post-punk's' engagement with gender relations, sexuality, consumerism, imperialism etc. The likes of the Au Pairs, Delta 5, Gang of Four, Ludus, The Pop Group and Scritti Politti drew from Marxist, feminist and situationist ideas to forge cultural critiques that located punk and pop as sites of political struggle. By the 1980s, however, the vagaries of post-modernism and the allure of pop's subtle subversions had combined to blindside many of punk's more cerebral exponents. Radical form was deemed counterintuitive to pop's desires and pleasures; social realism was dismissed as reaffirming the inequalities that punk kicked against; the possibility of working 'outside' (or taking over) the music industry was pooh-poohed as an illusion.<sup>37</sup> That said, bands such as the Newtown Neurotics and The Redskins – alongside 'ranter' poets such as Seething Wells – continued to take inspiration from punk's attitude and claims to relevance in order to propagate avowedly socialist politics. A burgeoning independent scene also continued to function, facilitating benefits for the unemployed, the miners and others caught beneath the wheels

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<sup>36</sup> Andy Gill review of Cabaret Voltaire's *Red Mecca* in *NME*, 22 August 1981, p. 35.

<sup>37</sup> Simon Frith, 'Post-Punk Blues', *Marxism Today*, March 1983, pp. 18–21.

of Thatcherism.<sup>38</sup> As a result, the riots of 1981 were occasionally evoked as a motif of Britain's deepening fissures, albeit long after the streets of Toxteth, Moss Side, Brixton and elsewhere had been (temporarily) cleared of rubble.

## **Conclusion**

Punk's politics were expressed visually, verbally and physically. They were also communicated via cultural processes and modes of production. Taken as a whole, punk was too diverse and contradictory to constitute a coherent cultural or, indeed, political movement. It did, however, provide a space and a means for protest; it facilitated instinctive and often insightful critiques of politics and society more generally; it stimulated genuine moments of empowerment for those involved. By so doing, punk served as a formative social and political experience for many that helped shape opinions and attitudes to life thereafter. Most obviously, punk fed into or linked to broader political causes and ideas, be it CND, animal rights, anarchism or even the more disturbing politics of the far-right. Equally, punk brokered social and political negation through its processes of reflexivity and demystification: politicians lie, the media distorts, capital corrupts, the music industry is exploitative, birth-work-mortgage-death.

In the context of 1980–81, punk's penchant for social commentary served to provide snapshots of a distinct historical moment. If The Specials' 'Ghost Town' has become the standard reference point to capture the mood of 1981's riotous summer, then various other or lesser known songs could be claimed likewise. The Jam's 'Funeral Pyre' was released in May 1981, reaching number one as it railed against the scorched earth politics of Thatcherism that sparked reaction a few weeks later. More obscurely, perhaps, Killing Joke's

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<sup>38</sup> See John Robb, *Death to Trad Rock*, London: Cherry Red, 2009.

'Tension' came out at the same time (on the b-side of 'Follow the Leader'), embodying the mood of the early 1980s in its title, sound and lyrics of entrapment: 'I can't get out'. Indeed, punk and its various permutations revealed a range of youthful responses to the world as it changed around them. In Britain, this meant the sped-up transformation from an industrial economy to one based on service industries and increasingly skewed towards financial sectors based in London and south-east; from broadly Keynesian economics to the monetarist – neoliberal – values of Thatcherism. It also meant the slower-but-nevertheless-real changes effected by geo-political politics, technological advancements and attitudes to gender relations, class, race and sexuality.

Returning to the early 1980s, punk sounded and documented a country at war with itself; a country uncertain of its future, struggling to understand its past and caught in a period of transition. Though it failed to derail the Thatcherite juggernaut, punk offered alternative possibilities and sites of struggle. Against the pastel colours, champagne fizz and conspicuous consumption that fuels popular memory of the decade, punk's diaspora captured a darker narrative. If the riots of 1980–81 remain resonant, then it's partly as a result of punk's ability to distil their essence in cultural form.