

# *Marx-Lenin-Rotten-Strummer: British Marxism and Youth Culture in the 1970's*

Article

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## Marx–Lenin–Rotten–Strummer:

### British Marxism and Youth Culture in the 1970s

**Abstract:** This article uses the debate on youth culture that took place in the pages of *Marxism Today* (1973–75) to explore the ways by which cultural changes and identity politics began to challenge, complement and redefine the British left. The debate revealed much about the tensions that ultimately pulled the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) apart. But it also uncovered faultlines that had ramifications for the left more generally and, perhaps, the wider British polity.

Keywords: Communism, British Left, Punk, Youth Culture, Politics

Speaking in June 1976, Paul Bradshaw, the editor of the Young Communist League's (YCL) *Challenge* newspaper, surveyed the state of British youth culture.<sup>1</sup> Superficially, he reasoned, things did not look good. The youth movements that helped define the 1960s had fragmented; popular music appeared depoliticized. Though glam rock had briefly offered an interesting challenge to masculine stereotypes, and reggae continued to provide a militant protest that transmitted to the 'heart of "Babylon"', nostalgia for a 'golden age of rock' was becoming ever more commonplace.<sup>2</sup> If anything, signs of reaction were creeping in, as indicated by the allusions to fascism made by David Bowie in his Thin White Duke persona.<sup>3</sup> Escapism (soul) and 'friendly yobbos from next door' (Slade) appeared to preoccupy the young working class.<sup>4</sup>

Not all was lost. As is well known, the mid-1970s found British politics and the British economy ensnared in domestic and international problems.<sup>5</sup> Inflationary pressures inherited from the 1960s precipitated a steady rise in unemployment and industrial conflict that combined to inaugurate a prolonged period of socio-economic and political strife.<sup>6</sup> The

global oil crisis of 1973 had served only to exacerbate matters, tipping the economy into recession and providing the backdrop to a miners' dispute that hastened the fall of Edward Heath's Conservative government in early 1974. Though growth returned in 1975, Britain's erratic and relatively sluggish economic performance fed into a far deeper sense of post-imperial malaise. This, in turn, was articulated in a language of 'crisis' and 'decline' that eventually found embodiment in the Labour government's resort to an International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan in 1976 and, later, the strikes that informed the so-called 'winter of discontent' (1978–9).<sup>7</sup> Given such a context, Bradshaw readjusted his investigative lens to predict that 'new forms of culture, especially through music', would develop to 'give expression to the problems facing youth'. Unemployment and inner-city tensions born of fractured working-class communities would prompt new cultural trends. The task for the left, Bradshaw concluded, was to analyse such tendencies as they emerged; to understand their progressive and reactionary inclinations and prevent them forming conduits to fascism. Boldly and openly, the communist party needed to project a 'lively, viable alternative'.<sup>8</sup>

Bradshaw's estimations proved well-timed. Coinciding with his speech to the YCL executive committee, a new youth culture was indeed gestating in the streets, art schools and minds of disaffected counter-culturalists. By June 1976, the Sex Pistols' early gigs and interviews had begun to cause a stir in the music press, presenting a challenge to the conceits of the music industry and reconfiguring pop's aesthetic in ways that foregrounded youthful rebellion amidst political signifiers and wilful iconoclasm. The Clash, who offered social-realist ballast to the Pistols' negation, would make their stage debut on 4 July. Come the end of the year, moreover, and the furore that followed the Sex Pistols' 'foul-mouthed' appearance on Thames Television's teatime *Today* programme stoked a media-panic that

propelled punk into the popular consciousness.<sup>9</sup> The kids were revolting: Britain's various 'crises', be they a product of social dislocation, economic decline or imperial hangover, appeared to have found cultural realization.<sup>10</sup>

Much debate was to follow – both in political circles and in the media – about just what punk *meant*.<sup>11</sup> Punk itself would comprise a contested culture through which diverse expressions became manifest as it evolved over time and permeated beyond London's confines. For Bradshaw, however, writing in early 1977, punk's 'new wave' met his own brief with aplomb: that is, punk served to provide cultural expression for 'working class kids [...] tired of having no voice to shout about unemployment' and 'other rubbish we're being fed'.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the period that followed was partly defined by leftist attempts to engage with and channel youth culture towards progressive ends. Rock Against Racism (RAR), more closely associated with the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) than the CPGB, became a staple of the late 1970s struggle against the National Front (NF), building its support on local clubs and punk-influenced bands delivering 'militant entertainment'. Not unrelatedly, the politics of what became known as post-punk were oft-informed by leftist concerns as to questions of gender, sexuality, language, desire and cultural production.<sup>13</sup>

Of course, the extent to which Bradshaw's foresight may be put down to chance, intuition, astute Marxist analysis or wishful thinking is open to question. What remains interesting, however, is the debate underpinning CPGB attempts to locate youth culture as a site of political struggle. Running in *Marxism Today* through 1973–75 and into the wider communist press thereafter, the protracted discussion revealed much about the fissures opening up in the CPGB as it travelled towards dissolution in 1991. Cultural changes, the undermining of communist authority in the wake of Soviet actions and revelations, shifting social dynamics, the emergence of identity politics, technological advances and the allure of

consumption all conspired to cut a swathe through long-held convictions. As the world changed, so the CPGB struggled to change with it.<sup>14</sup> But while the results of all this are relatively well known, as ‘modernisers’ and ‘traditionalists’ did battle over the CPGB’s future, so the substance of the party’s debate on youth culture – not to mention the relationship between politics and popular music<sup>15</sup> – remains pertinent today.

The purpose of this article is twofold. First, to demonstrate how and why a section of the YCL came to embrace punk as a signal of youthful revolt at least somewhat in tune with the objectives of the CPGB; second, to use the party’s debate on youth culture as a means to expose tensions that served to enliven but also fragment the left over the later twentieth century. Previous accounts of the CPGB’s relationship to youth culture have been critical of the party’s ‘late’ response to punk.<sup>16</sup> The SWP’s support for and involvement in RAR has, understandably, overshadowed the CPGB’s more piecemeal interaction with punk-associated cultures.<sup>17</sup> But while YCL members may not have seized the initiative as decisively as others on the left, some revealed themselves attuned to punk’s early stirrings and engaged in wider debate as to the youth cultural changes on-going over the later 1970s. In fact, Bradshaw’s report to the YCL executive in the summer of 1976 revealed how at least some young comrades had absorbed the analyses emanating from the Birmingham University Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) that, in turn, found expression in the pages of *Marxism Today* and countless academic studies of youth culture thereafter.<sup>18</sup>

### **The historiography: communists are just part-time workers**

This article relates to three overlapping areas of historical debate. First, the history of British communism, primarily in relation to the CPGB’s attempt to adapt itself to the changing political and socio-economic circumstances of the post-war period. Already, Geoff Andrews

has neatly detailed the party's journey to dissolution in his *Endgames and New Times* (2004), unravelling the intra-party tensions that served to pull the CPGB asunder. For Andrews, 'militant labourism' and 'socialist humanism' provided two divergent political currents that served eventually to cut across the party's predilection for disciplined unity. Amidst the ensuing debates, questions relating to emergent youth cultures flickered into view alongside the more definite intellectual shifts occasioned by the New Left and the development of identity-based social movements that complicated the class basis of Marxism. Even so, there is arguably more to be said as to how and to what end these socio-cultural and intellectual tendencies impacted on the CPGB. The focus of this article is therefore on how 'youth' and 'youth culture' accentuated and revealed faultlines opening up across British communism.

Evan Smith and Mike Waite have previously delved into such territory: Smith by exploring the CPGB's relationship to RAR and youth culture generally; Waite in relation to the fluctuating fortunes of the YCL.<sup>19</sup> But the intention here is to widen the historical gaze in order to consider developments across the British left. Second, therefore, the article feeds into a growing literature documenting how cultural and identity politics complemented, challenged and realigned leftist perspectives from at least the 1950s. So, for example, Stephen Brooke, Jodi Burkett, Lucy Robinson, Paul Stott and Natalie Thomlinson are among those to have recently explored the interaction between leftist politics and questions of class, race, gender and sexuality.<sup>20</sup> Celia Hughes, too, has traced the experiences of young activists engaging in leftist politics during the 1960s, with an emphasis on the 'liberation of self' that captures the paradigmatic shift underpinning the left's osmosis over the late twentieth century.<sup>21</sup> But how were such developments expressed culturally; how did they reflect or become manifest in the cultural practices of young people? Certainly, RAR-ANL

succeeded in linking the overt politics of anti-racism to youth cultural mediums beyond the realm of the organized left. But this was not without its tensions. The accompanying *politics* of anti-racism were not always welcomed by those who nevertheless supported the cause and attended the events. 'None of us are Socialist Workers', The Ruts' Malcolm Owen replied to a question as to his band's politics and their committed support for RAR, 'we just don't like racists'.<sup>22</sup>

As this suggests, cultures could be political in and of themselves; they did not necessarily fit into or align easily with pre-existing political forms. Arguably, and thirdly, therefore, this article raises the question as to whether – or to what extent – alternative or formative political spaces may be found beyond 'traditional' modes of party, protest and meeting. To date, in relation to youth, such debate has taken place in the realms of social and political science; first through the primarily Marxist lens of the CCCS and, more recently, in response to a perceived detachment between young people and parliamentary politics.<sup>23</sup> Historians, too, have begun to stray from party and parliament in search of competing or complementary sites of political expression.<sup>24</sup> Amidst concern at falling voter turnouts and the apparent disconnect opening up between an evermore professionalized political class and an electorate jaded by 'spin' and scandal, it has become imperative to look elsewhere for political engagement. In many ways, the 'cultural turn' initiated by the New Left and taken up by communist 'modernisers' thereafter was an early attempt to do just this. But what if, in seeking to redefine the parameters of class struggle, the left served less as the vanguard of revolution, and more as a harbinger of socio-political fragmentation?

**The thesis: capital, it fails us now**



The CPGB's debate on youth culture was initiated in 1972–3 by Martin Jacques, then a 27-year-old lecturer in economic history at the University of Bristol and member of the party's executive committee.<sup>25</sup> Having reported to the central committee in February, Jacques published his analysis in *Marxism Today* the following September under the title 'Trends in Youth Culture: Some Aspects'.<sup>26</sup> The objective was to understand the origins, development and nature of post-war youth culture in order to posit connections between overtly political protest (such as demonstrations against the war in Vietnam) and disenchantment with capitalist society displayed at a cultural level. It also formed part of a broader effort to contest the CPGB's traditional emphasis on industrial struggle as the precursor to political consciousness ('economism') and enact a 'cultural turn' in the party's politics and perspectives.<sup>27</sup>

There were precedents. Not surprisingly, the post-war emergence of distinct youth cultures centred on style and popular music generated reaction from the party over the 1950s and 1960s. Initially, at least, curt dismissals of all things 'pop' being a product of American imperialism tended to set the tone, though some in the YCL endeavoured to align their communism to youthful disaffection.<sup>28</sup> Folk music, revived through the Workers' Music Association, remained the party's soundtrack of choice.<sup>29</sup> Come the 1960s, however, and a new generation of YCL recruits began to filter their revolutionary impulses through acts of social and cultural transgression. Not only did the widespread student protests of the period generate excitement and allow the YCL a notable foothold in student politics, but the fledgling counter-culture was recognized to provide a youthful challenge to bourgeois morality.<sup>30</sup> In response, and amidst often terse debate, the YCL sought to ride on the crest of youth culture's wave, organising discos, events (including a 1967 youth festival at the Derbyshire miners' holiday camp in Skegness featuring The Kinks) and presenting itself as

part of the 'The Trend'.<sup>31</sup> To this end, *Challenge* was revamped in accord with the aesthetics of the underground press and a pamphlet – replete with a gently psychedelic cover – put the YCL's case to recruit young 'ban-the-bombers, anti-racialists, folk singers' and others to the party.<sup>32</sup>

Of course, cultural questions had also proven central to debates initiated by the New Left born – in part – from splits in the CPGB following the Soviet intervention in Hungary and Nikita Khrushchev's revelations about Stalin (both 1956).<sup>33</sup> As Marxists explored beyond the remits previously defined by the party (via Moscow), so new influences – from Gramsci and Lukács to Barthes and Benjamin, Althusser and Adorno, Mao and Marcuse – began to shape intellectual discussion across leftist milieus through the 1960s into 1970s and beyond. Simultaneously, 'new social movements' were forged and celebrated over the terrains of race, gender and sexuality as the personal became political. New parties and protests jostled for position, aligning to student groups and interweaving amidst the emergent counter-culture of the 1960s. As a result, journals such as *New Left Review* gave space to articles examining the political significance of the Rolling Stones and the CCCS pioneered research positing youth culture as a 'site of resistance' to prevailing socio-economic structures, class relations and cultural hegemony.<sup>34</sup> By 1973, therefore, some in the CPGB and YCL felt the need to focus party attention more fixedly on questions of youth, especially as the 1960s began to give way to the harsher sensibilities and intensifying struggles of the 1970s.<sup>35</sup>

The influence of Gramsci and the CCCS is worth dwelling on. Gramsci's pre-war writings had already informed the New Left of the later 1950s and 1960s before they began to find favour among CPGB members keen to revise the party's ideas and *modus operandi*. In particular, Gramsci's concept of hegemony proved influential, while his thoughts on the

relationship between politics and culture were mediated through the seminal works of E.P. Thompson, Raymond Williams and the CCCS.<sup>36</sup> By the early 1970s, communists such as Jacques – alongside key figures such as Dave Cook, Sue Shipman, Jon Bloomfield, Mike Prior, Bill Warren, Beatrix Campbell and Judith Hunt – were evidently imbued with Gramscian ideas. In the Communist University of London, moreover, set up by the party in 1969 to offer a forum for students to engage with the politics of the CPGB, organizers and participants (including Stuart Hall) provided a nexus between communists and a wider leftist milieu keen to reinvigorate British Marxism.<sup>37</sup> Political and academic imperatives coalesced, as the ideas of the New Left and the CCCS informed communists and the party itself provided space for discussion and dissemination.<sup>38</sup>

Jacques' analysis of contemporary youth culture was evidently shaped by such intellectual stimulus. He began by outlining what he perceived to be the three determining characteristics of the post-war generation.<sup>39</sup> First he suggested that an 'ideological framework' defined by full employment and rising living standards (as opposed to unemployment and fascism) ensured post-war youth bore higher expectations than their forebears. Second, he posited that youth's influence was expanding. The proportion of the population aged between 15 and 24 had increased over the 1950s and 1960s; widening educational opportunities and rising incomes allowed for greater autonomy and spending capacity. Third, Jacques noted how youth's social composition was evolving due to changes in industry and the extension of technical, scientific and intellectual labour. As a result, Jacques suggested that working-class youth were becoming more diverse in terms of work and education, feeding into the growing ranks of students and white-collar workers that allowed 'cross-fertilization' between classes.

There were, of course, tensions amidst all this. Not only did the young working class remain among the most exploited section of the workforce, but educational opportunities, though increasing, continued to be filtered through channels geared towards the needs of capital. Youthful expression, ever more vibrant and self-confident, provoked division in the working-class family, fanning generational conflict; commercialization, the driver of consumerism, helped shape the ideological content of youth culture. Consequently, Jacques argued, the degree to which youth's cultural tendencies could be deemed either progressive or rebellious had to be evaluated in terms of both form and content.

Before moving on to assess the connotations of such socio-cultural change, Jacques next offered a brief history lesson. Rock 'n' roll, skiffle and the growth of CND (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament) were hailed as early tremors that challenged the social, political and ideological 'straightjacket' of the 1950s. The 'pop explosion' triggered by The Beatles in 1963–4 was then deemed to have reinforced generational dislocations apparent in wider society. Not only was popular music recognized thereafter as a cultural vehicle through which young people's feelings and aspirations were expressed, but it helped bind together various identities, attitudes and interests that reflected youth's growing self-assurance. Simultaneously, Jacques suggested, the commercialization of pop was resisted by the formation of 'underground' scenes centred on folk, jazz or r 'n' b, culminating in the emergence of a recognizable counter-culture towards the end of the decade.

Again there were tensions. The counter-culture's conception of an 'alternative' society was vague; its realization born of no coherent strategy. Beyond concerted opposition to the American war in Vietnam, it inclined towards individualism rather than collectivism.<sup>40</sup> For Jacques, therefore, the counter-culture's focus on freedom and self-expression remained 'immature': utopian-anarchist rather than proto-socialist.<sup>41</sup> This, in

turn, explained counter-cultural antipathy towards the state *in toto* and distrust of organizational leadership, including the labour movement. It also explained the counter-culture's appeal to those detached from the harsher realities of class struggle: to students and white-collar youth susceptible to such 'tendencies' as 'subjectivism [...], leftism, libertarianism and anarchism'.

That tensions should lead to fractures bore Jacques no surprise. As pop music became more commercially successful, so bands detached from their audience. Wealth, fame and a desire to experiment began to separate bands physically and emotionally from those who bought and listened to the music. Notably, too, class antagonisms were reasserted in cultural form, as between skinheads, students and middle-class elements within the counter-culture. Accordingly, by the early 1970s, youth culture was fragmenting as the class struggle intensified. Jacques' question for the CPGB was: how could the party 'translate the progressive developments' of youth culture into 'organized and consolidated form'?<sup>42</sup>

### **The debate: hegemony, you are the foulest creature**

The upheavals of 1956 required the CPGB to reassert its political identity over the 1960s. By so doing, and in response to contemporaneous socio-economic changes and emergent socio-political forces (most notably feminism and the student movement), divergent tendencies began to develop across the party: one stressing the CPGB's working-class basis in the labour movement, the other seeking to reimagine and extend the party's political reach beyond its core (male) working-class constituency.<sup>43</sup> Though both recognized the need for the CPGB to establish alliances and adapt its approach to changing circumstances, their realization roused evident friction. Running parallel to the debate on youth culture,

therefore, were comparable discussions as to the party's relationship to changing class forces, gender politics, race, sexuality, the Labour Party, trade union movement and non-CPGB left.<sup>44</sup> In effect, battlelines were being drawn for the internecine conflict that tore British communism asunder in the 1980s.

Not surprisingly, Jacques' article helped reveal many of the fractures beginning to course through the CPGB. Most obviously, it generated response from those keen to hold-fast to the Marxist-Leninist basis of the party's political and organizational approach. For John Boyd, who invoked Lenin's rejection of 'special cultures' to contest the very premise of Jacques' thesis, youth culture was but an invention of capital; it was the 'child of Uncle Sam', a 'fire ship in disguise', a product of cultural imperialism that 'imposed alienation' and destroyed cultural heritage.<sup>45</sup> Rather than providing a conduit for rebellion, Boyd recognized youth culture as revolt 'dressed up' to foster division and redirect young people away from the *real* struggle. The discotheque, Boyd railed, with its darkened room, loud music, coca cola and flashing lights, was designed so that 'every sense [is] taken care of to ensure that not one thought, let alone a social idea, takes place'. A working-class culture could not be built on commercial terms, he concluded, it resided in folk clubs and on street corners, developed – as directed by Lenin – in the spirit of class struggle and forged from 'the stores of knowledge which mankind has accumulated'.<sup>46</sup>

Related arguments were put forward by Brian Filling and Denver Walker. Where Filling accused Jacques of not writing from a 'class position', Walker questioned the use of the term 'culture' in relation to music and styles transmitted through the media.<sup>47</sup> Even the counter-culture, he insisted, was based on acceptance of the system: 'dropping out' and drugs were the 'solipsistic' responses of a bourgeoisie in retreat. Some credence was given to John Lennon for writing 'Working Class Hero', though even this was let down in Denver's

mind by its failure to offer a 'way forward' for the workers. As for 'Imagine', Lennon's paean to a world without religion or boundaries, its affinity to any future communist society was dismissed as unclear given that the song contained no reference to the Soviet Union! All in all, Denver concluded, pop culture was divisive and no substitute for the depth and breadth of mass struggle.

As should be apparent, the arguments of Boyd *et al* objected to the blurred class boundaries in Jacques' analysis. They reasserted the primacy of economics and recoiled from the idea of revolutionary struggle being pursued through cultural channels that were becoming ever more commercialized.<sup>48</sup> In their stock references to the Soviet Union and reliance on a narrow reading of Lenin, they revealed Stalinist predilections that ensured a rigidly mechanistic interpretation of the relationship between class, culture and capital.

Alternative perspectives came from those more sympathetic to Jacques' attempts to broaden the party's sphere of engagement. This meant, first, foregrounding culture as a site of struggle in straightforward Marxist terms. So, for example, Jeremy Hawthorn located artistic production, communication and consumption in the context of 'base' and 'superstructure'. Just as religion contained elements of social struggle ('the heart of a heartless world'), so Hawthorn suggested culture should also be seen as both 'theirs' and 'ours' – its 'progressive' and 'reactionary' contradictions reflecting social contestations.<sup>49</sup> In other words, Hawthorn began to grapple towards conceptualising youth culture in hegemonic terms that complemented Jacques' analysis and opened a way beyond what were understood to be crudely economic readings of Marx.

Others brokered similar arguments. Paul Fauvet dismissed the idea of youth culture harbouring some kind of capitalist conspiracy by distinguishing between the making and commercialization of culture. Culture, he suggested, indicating shifts on-going across the left

in the 1960s–70s, provided means to challenge ‘bourgeois norms’ beyond the purely economic.<sup>50</sup> Nick Kettle, meanwhile, recognized that culture could not provide a ‘short cut to socialism’, but nevertheless cited the later Beatles and soul music as examples of pop’s political and ‘liberating’ potential.<sup>51</sup> For Judy Bloomfield, it was pop music’s ‘celebration of the senses’ that gave it political potential. In language that nodded towards debates on pleasure and desire fuelled by feminism and the counter-culture, she defined music and youth culture as ‘symptomatic of changing consciousness’.<sup>52</sup>

Surprisingly, perhaps, questions of race and gender were only tentatively brought to the fore. Imtiaz Chounara urged the party to recognize how black youth were caught between two cultures: that of Britain and that of their parents.<sup>53</sup> Bloomfield noted how the family unit helped instil gender roles that passed into broader cultural relations. By so doing, however, both Chounara and Bloomfield raised a further point of contention: namely, contradictions *within* the working class.<sup>54</sup> Throughout the debate, the relationship between class and culture, between ‘progressive’ and ‘reactionary’ elements, proved difficult to contain. But once attention began to fall on ‘escapist’, racist, sexist or homophobic aspects of working-class culture, so more instinctive (maybe generational) class affinities began to take effect. If hegemony helped explain such contradictions, then it did not prevent there developing a sense by which the working class were being presented more as part of the problem than solution.

Come April 1975 and the discussion was temporarily brought to a close, with Jacques bolstering his argument and replying to those who criticized his original thesis.<sup>55</sup> This time he began with Marx, quoting from the ‘Preface’ to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859) to denote the limited autonomy accorded to ideology within the relationship between base and superstructure. Nodding then to Gramsci, Jacques explained



the 'consensual' nature of political and ideological hegemony under the rubric of 'advanced capitalism'. The implication, he continued, was that class oppression was multi-faceted and should be fought on various levels, including the cultural and ideological. Simultaneously, he understood that the class nature of such a struggle would not be recognized by the majority of participants. The 1960s, however, had revealed 'the first signs of disenchantment with and opposition to the dominant cultural practice amongst sections moving into struggle for, in the main, the first time'.

The relationship between class and culture remained problematical. Though recognising the existence of two cultures, 'bourgeois' and 'working class', Jacques insisted that the 'partially autonomous' culture of the working class was nevertheless 'dominated' by bourgeois values. Betwixt this, Jacques continued, distinctive youth cultures had begun to develop as a result of changing historical conditions. These, in turn, combined progressive tendencies with elements of dominant bourgeois ideology (individualism etc.), but retained the potential to rouse consciousness. As for the student-led protests of the 1960s, Jacques accepted they bore petty-bourgeois inclinations. He nevertheless warned against seeing students as inherently petty-bourgeois, maintaining that youth movements comprised manual and white-collar youths among their ranks. For this reason, youth cultures could not be detached – or seen as separate – from the class struggle.

Jacques' reply did not bring with it firm political conclusions. He preferred instead to leave the discussion hanging, positing further enquiry into the physiognomy of contemporary youth cultures. Certainly, the debates that preceded 1977's revision of the CPGB's official programme – *The British Road to Socialism* – did not thereby lead to youth's featuring heavily in the published resolutions, despite Jacques being one of its co-authors.<sup>56</sup> Only in 1979 did the YCL produce *Our Future*, a statement that spoke to the 'No Future

Generation' and came replete with photos of punks, skinheads and young activists. Youth cultural identity, the programme insisted, be it ted, mod, rocker, hippy, skin, teenybopper or punk, served to provide a young person with a 'weapon' to '[make] their presence felt'; a collective identity through which 'real unity' could develop.<sup>57</sup> As this suggests, the emergence of punk informed the party's youth cultural analysis, enabling young comrades to test their conception of youth culture and explore the possibilities opened up by a cultural form ostensibly committed to 'threaten the status quo'.<sup>58</sup>

### **Conclusion: class war will never change anything?**

The YCL's embrace of punk has been well documented elsewhere.<sup>59</sup> Following Bradshaw's lead, *Challenge* lent support to the 'new wave' from early 1977 via approving summaries of the emergent scene, positive record reviews and, belatedly, support for RAR.<sup>60</sup> Not only did the paper's language and design transform ever closer towards a superficially 'punk' style through 1977–79, mimicking the cut 'n' paste aesthetic of fanzines and the stark graphics of punk record covers, but there were even occasions when YCL debate took place under the title of contemporaneous punk songs: White Riot (race), Love Lies Limp (sex), Complete Control (capitalism), Medium is the Tedium (education), Red London (socialism).<sup>61</sup> For a time, at least, punk groups played YCL-sponsored events (Sham 69 appeared at the 1977 London festival); a few young comrades even formed bands: Tony Friel was a founding member of The Fall; Green Gartside and Niall Jinks initiated Scritti Politti (with Gartside serving on the editorial board of *Challenge* through 1978–79). Inevitably, too, debate as to punk's meaning continued to find space in *Challenge*, *Comment* and *Marxism Today*, especially with regard to women and the ramifications of independent record production.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, the party's 'theoretical and discussion journal' came under the editorship of Jacques

in 1977, leading to ever greater space being given to cultural matters, including punk, pop music and youth culture more generally.

Of course, none of this could halt or prevent the CPGB's decline. The YCL, for all its attempts to connect with 'the kids on the street', was internally divided and haemorrhaging members by the late 1970s. Over the twenty-year period from 1967 to 1987, those enrolled in the YCL reputedly fell from 6,000 members to just 44. In 1974, the YCL comprised 2,576 card-holders; by 1979, its membership stood at 1,021.<sup>63</sup> Nor should too much be read into the YCL's embrace of punk when assessing its (and the CPGB's) decline. True, at least one YCL branch felt moved to complain about the lack of 'Marxist political content' in *Challenge* during Steve Munby's tenure as editor, writing to the CPGB executive in April 1978 to bemoan recent editions 'almost completely devoted to punk rock and homosexuality'.<sup>64</sup> But the YCL was fracturing prior to 1977 and before the adoption of punk-fests. More significant, perhaps, was the Conservative general election victory of 1979 – an event that served only to exacerbate faultlines running through the CPGB. With the party and its Soviet role model appearing ever more anachronistic over the 1980s, so the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the USSR sealed its fate.

And yet, to dismiss the debates that accompanied the CPGB's endgame would be a mistake. By contrast, they reveal much about the left's evolution over the later twentieth century, retaining insights and lessons still relevant today. First, the CPGB's ruminations – on pop, youth culture and other related concerns – did not take place in a vacuum. Nor was the substance of debate exclusive to the communist party. Take out the Soviet genuflections, and key aspects of Boyd *et al's* critique were oft-repeated by those inside and out of the CPGB who disavowed 'progressive' readings of youth culture and popular music. Most obviously, the presentation of popular culture as defined by its mode of production evoked

Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's writings on 'the culture industry' that formed the basis of much leftist criticism of mainstream rock and pop.<sup>65</sup> Likewise, the discombobulating spectacle of the disco and rock's fallacious sense of rebellion were more vigorously stated by anarchist groups drawing from situationist ideas.<sup>66</sup> The SWP, too, who more than any other leftist party made a connection to punk through RAR and the Anti-Nazi League, would later see its conference move against the 'populist' direction of the *Socialist Worker* newspaper, concerned as to the 'dilution' of its traditional focus on overtly political and industrial struggles.<sup>67</sup> Far cruder Trotskyist and Maoist critiques also drew on theories of Americanization and capitalist conspiracy to define their opposition to popular music and 'capitalist' culture.<sup>68</sup>

Second, it is interesting to note how Jacques' overview picked up on themes that would later inform academic reflections on youth. Flick through the contextualising segments of important books by Arthur Marwick, Bill Osgerby, Axel Schildt and Detlef Siegfried, and the core themes defined by Jacques as integral to understanding youth culture's emergence and development are all present and correct.<sup>69</sup> More immediately, of course, Jacques and subsequent historians were themselves informed (to varying degrees) by the pioneering research of Stuart Hall and others in the CCCS, many of whom contributed to discussion in *Marxism Today* over the 1970s and 1980s. Dave Laing, who reported to the CPGB's arts and leisure committee in 1976–77, provided one very important link, later writing the most insightful article on punk to appear in the communist press.<sup>70</sup> Certainly, the mission to find (class-based) resistance in the activities of young people dove-tailed neatly with the objective of the CCCS: that is, to contest and to counter sanguine, pessimistic or 'reactionary' readings of youthful consumption.

Third, and not dissimilarly, both Jacques' and Bradshaw's diagnosis of pop music and youth culture's condition in the mid-1970s would later become entrenched in the cultural narrative of punk. In other words, punk represented a response to rock's detachment from its youthful audience and the banalities of mainstream pop. Thus, to quote The Clash's Paul Simonon, whose dad had held communist membership, punk's origins stemmed from 'kids who watch *Top of the Pops*, and they see all these shitty groups, and there's nothing to do. And they see a guy play guitar in a club and they think it takes about a hundred years to learn to play.'<sup>71</sup> Early journalistic accounts (and much popular history thereafter) repeated these tropes, before further adding reference to the Sex Pistols' working-class backgrounds and the political relevance of The Clash's depictions of inner-city tensions. It was only 'natural', Caroline Coon wrote of the Pistols in late 1976, that a group of 'deprived London street kids' would produce music 'with a startlingly anti-establishment bias'.<sup>72</sup>

Fourth, the party's debate on youth culture – and culture more generally – was very much part of a gradual turn away from class as the 'master' identity within progressive politics. Put simply, questions of race, gender and sexuality began to contest (or intersect with) the working class' position as the driver of revolutionary struggle. Of course, synchronicity beyond the fragments was aspired to. The debates seeking to align Marxism with social movements of various hue were amongst the most politically stimulating of the period; the struggles of 'new social movements' brought about necessary and positive social transformation.<sup>73</sup> Nevertheless, such a process turned attention towards contradictions *within* the working class as much as without. In youth cultural terms, the skinhead style was recognised by Bradshaw as a reassertion of working-class identity in the face of counter-cultural individualism, but associated hooliganism was likewise interpreted as but a 'lumpen' reaction to socio-economic change.<sup>74</sup> Equally, if 'labourism' and 'economism' were

designated drags on the revolution, then so too was a working-class culture deemed to be imbued with reactionary tendencies absorbed from the ruling class. The strains occasioned by such developments remain.<sup>75</sup>

More broadly, perhaps, the debate gave hint of politics existing outside the traditional forums of party, parliament and protest meeting. For many of the young people in whom the CPGB recognized disaffections, anxieties and desires, the politics of party – be it the CPGB or political organizations in general – no longer served as a relevant means of expression. The cultural realm – alongside the private, social and commercial – brokered new modes of identity that cut across pre-existing class-based, geographic, religious or traditional affinities. As a result, youthful disaffection, or apparent disinterest, should not therefore equate to political disengagement *per se*, but to a disengagement from formal political processes and practices, a development that has generational repercussions for the British polity into the twenty-first century.<sup>76</sup>

Finally, the CPGB's youth cultural debate revealed the party capable of motivating and hosting intellectually vibrant discussion even as it headed for dissolution. It remains something of a paradox that *Marxism Today* became ever more effervescent as the party fell deeper into decline. Without doubt, the debates presented in the journal make for fascinating reading. Like many a great punk record, they serve as time capsules that provide insight into the tenor and the conflicts of their time. If the Sex Pistols' Johnny Rotten and The Clash's Joe Strummer could not save the CPGB, then their innovations helped reveal tensions that still cut to the heart of the British left.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Paul Bradshaw, 'Trends in Youth Culture in the 1970s', *Cogito*, No. 3 (1976), 3–13. The article was based on Bradshaw's report to the YCL executive committee.

<sup>2</sup> Reynolds, *Retromania*, 276–308. The early-to-mid 1970s saw a rock 'n' roll revival, for which the 1972 Rock 'n' Roll festival held at Wembley Stadium was perhaps the key event. We may think, too, of the films *That'll Be the Day* (1973) and *American Graffiti* (1973), while various stars of the era wrote rock 'n' roll homages. Most obviously, John Lennon recorded *Rock 'n Roll* (1975), but hear also 10cc's 'Rubber Bullets', Elton John's 'Your Sister Can't Twist (But She Can Rock 'n' Roll)' and Led Zeppelin's 'Rock and Roll'. Glam, too, had a rock 'n' roll undertow, as celebrated on Gary Glitter's 'Rock and Roll (Parts One and Two)'. The musical *Grease* also opened in London in 1973; *Happy Days*, the American teen-comedy set in the 1950s, was broadcast from 1974. The CPGB's nod to rock 'n' roll revivalism was embodied in Shakin' Stevens' regular appearances at YCL and party benefits in the 1970s.

<sup>3</sup> Bowie made comments referring to the desirability of a fascist dictator and played with the signifiers of fascism in various interviews and appearances at this time. See Buckley, *Strange Fascination: David Bowie, the Definitive Story*, 289–91. We should note, too, that two months after Bradshaw's speech came Eric Clapton's racist outburst to an audience at Birmingham Odeon. It was this event that acted as the stimulus for Rock Against Racism.

<sup>4</sup> Bradshaw, 'Trends in Youth Culture in the 1970s', 3–13.

<sup>5</sup> For a comprehensive overview, see Harrison, *Finding a Role?*

<sup>6</sup> By 1976, unemployment had moved beyond the symbolic one million mark to reach 1,502,000 (5.7 per cent) in 1977; inflation rocketed to around 25 per cent in 1975 and continued to fluctuate thereafter. See Glynn and Booth, *Modern Britain*; Coopey and Woodward (eds), *Britain in the 1970s*.

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<sup>7</sup> Tomlinson, *The Politics of Decline*; idem, 'Thatcher, Inflation and the "Decline" of the British Economy', in Jackson and Saunders (eds), *Making Thatcher's Britain*, 62–77; Hay, 'Chronicles of a Death Foretold, 446–70. For contemporary examples of this mood beyond the newspaper headlines, see (for various responses) Clutterbuck, *Britain in Agony*; Haseler, *The Death of British Democracy*; Kramnick, *Is Britain Dying?*; Hall, *Policing the Crisis*; Harrison and Glyn, *The British Economic Disaster*; King, *Why is Britain Becoming Harder to Govern?*.

<sup>8</sup> Bradshaw, 'Trends in Youth Culture', 3–13.

<sup>9</sup> As is well-known, the live programme saw the Pistols' guitarist, Steve Jones, conclude the interview by declaring the presenter, Bill Grundy, a 'fucking rotter'. The best history of punk's emergence and early development remains Savage, *England's Dreaming*.

<sup>10</sup> For interesting analysis, see Moran, "'Stand Up and Be Counted'", 173–98.

<sup>11</sup> Worley, 'Shot By Both Sides', 333–54.

<sup>12</sup> Note from the Editor, *Challenge* (March 1977), 7.

<sup>13</sup> Reynolds, *Rip it Up and Start Again*; Wilkinson, 'Difficult Fun'. For a good example of 'post-punk' politics being given full expression, listen to Gang of Four, *Entertainment*, EMI (1979).

<sup>14</sup> Andrews, *Endgames and New Times*.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Frith, *Sound Effects*; Street, *Rebel Rock*; idem, *Music & Politics*.

<sup>16</sup> Tranmer, 'Rocking Against Racism', 267–81; Smith, 'Are the Kids United?', 85–118.

<sup>17</sup> For CPGB recognition of its 'inadequate' involvement in RAR over 1977, see minutes of the arts and leisure committee, 5 May 1978 (just after the first RAR–ANL carnival, held at London's Victoria Park in April 1978), CP/CENT/CULT/2/7 (People's History Museum, Salford).

<sup>18</sup> The principal CCCS-inspired take on punk remains Hebdige, *Subculture*.

<sup>19</sup> Smith, 'Are the Kids United?', 85–118; idem, 'When the Party Comes Down', 38–75; Waite, 'The Young Communist League and Youth Culture', 8–10.

<sup>20</sup> Brooke, *Sexual Politics*; Burkett, *Constructing Post-Imperial Britain*; Robinson, *Gay Men and the Left in Post-War Britain*; Stott, 'For Every Action There is an Equal and Opposite Reaction', 96–125; Tomlinson, *Race and Ethnicity in the Women's Movement in England*. See also 'Socialist-Feminism: Out of the Blue', special issue of *Feminist Review*, 23, 1 (1986) for debates on related issues.



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<sup>21</sup> Hughes, *Young Lives on the Left*.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Steve Clarke, 'The Rise of The Ruts', *NME* (14 July 1979), 7–8. See also, Paul Morley, 'Chaos and Confusion', *NME* (22 July 1978), 7–8; Simon Frith and Chris Brazier in 'Play Power '78', *Melody Maker* (30 September 1978), 37–9.

<sup>23</sup> For the 'classic' CCCS analysis, see Cohen, 'Subcultural Conflict and Working Class Community', 4–51; Clarke, Hall, Jefferson and Roberts, 'Subcultures, Cultures and Class'. 9–74. For just a few excerpts from debates on youthful disengagement with mainstream politics, see Mycock and Tonge (eds), *Beyond the Youth Citizenship Commission*; Henn and Foard, 'Social Differentiation in Young People's Political Participation', 360–80; Henn, Weinstein and Hodgkinson, 'Social Capital and Political Participation', 467–79; Parry, Moyser and Day, *Political Participation and Democracy in Britain*; Jowell and Park, *Young People, Politics and Citizenship*.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Black, *Redefining British Culture*; Hilton, 'Politics is Ordinary', 230–68; Robinson, 'Sometimes I like to stay in and watch TV', 354–390; Worley, 'Punk, Politics and British (fan)zines, 1976–84', 76–106.

<sup>25</sup> See the minutes and letters relating to CPGB questions contained in CP/CENT/CULT/2/2.

<sup>26</sup> Martin Jacques, 'Trends in Youth Culture: Some Aspects', *Marxism Today* (September 1973), 268–80.

<sup>27</sup> For Jacques' more general argument, see his 'Culture, Class Struggle and the Communist Party', *Comment* (29 May 1976), 163–5. For an overview, see Andrews, *Endgames and New Times*, 50–72.

<sup>28</sup> Waite, 'The Young Communist League and Youth Culture', 8–10.

<sup>29</sup> Harker, 'Communism and the British Folk Revival', *Red Strains*, 89–104; idem, *Class Act*. The CPGB's cultural committee stated in 1962 that folk music was a 'valuable popular weapon with which to combat the brain-softening commercial culture that the masters think fit for the masses' (CP/CENT/CULT/01/04).

<sup>30</sup> See, for youth as a political force, George Bridges, 'British Youth in Revolt', *Marxism Today* (August 1969), 252–6. For the YCL and the counter-culture, see copies of *Challenge* in the late 1960s and Waite, 'Sex 'n' Drugs 'n' Rock 'n' Roll (and Communism)', in Andrews, Fishman and Morgan (eds), *Opening the Books*, 210–24.

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<sup>31</sup> Gildart, *Images of England through Popular Music*, 139. For debate, see the YCL's District Congress, December 1967, CP/YCL/09/04.

<sup>32</sup> YCL, *The Trend—Communism* (London 1967). That many in the YCL were resistant, or suspicious, of such a strategy was revealed at the 1971 YCL conference, which resolved that *Challenge's* appeal to the 'mass of uncommitted youth' had been 'proven' incorrect. See *Report of the 28<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the YCL* (London 1971).

<sup>33</sup> Kenny, *The First New Left*. An important early example would be Williams' *Culture and Society*.

<sup>34</sup> Clarke, Hall, Jefferson and Roberts, 'Subcultures, Cultures and Class', 9–74. For the Rolling Stones, see the articles by Alan Beckett, Richard Merton and Michael Parsons in *New Left Review* (January–February 1968 and May–June 1968).

<sup>35</sup> An early article along these lines came from Tom Bell, 'An Analysis of British Young People', *Cogito*, No. 1 (1971), 4–6.

<sup>36</sup> Forgacs, 'Gramsci and Marxism in Britain', 83–4.

<sup>37</sup> Details of the organizers, participants and activities of the Communist University are contained in the CUL Boxes (People's History Museum, Salford).

<sup>38</sup> Bradshaw makes explicit reference to the CCCS in his *Cogito* article (p. 3).

<sup>39</sup> Jacques, 'Trends in Youth Culture', 268–80.

<sup>40</sup> We should note that Jacques did not consider the collective impulses of, for example, communal living, squatting etc.

<sup>41</sup> For emergent counter-cultural criticisms of the organized or party-political left see Nuttall, *Bomb Culture*.

<sup>42</sup> Jacques, 'Trends in Youth Culture', 268–80.

<sup>43</sup> Andrews, *Endgames and New Times*, 73–139.

<sup>44</sup> See, example, the debate on class in Hunt (ed.), *Class and Class Structure*.

<sup>45</sup> John Boyd, 'Trends in Youth Culture', *Marxism Today* (December 1973), 375–8; also A. Mills' contribution in *Marxism Today* (December 1974), 79–80.

<sup>46</sup> Boyd drew from Lenin's 'On Proletarian Culture' (1920) and 'Tasks of the Youth Leagues' (1920).

<sup>47</sup> Brian Filling, 'Trends in Youth Culture', *Marxism Today* (September 1974), 283–6; Denver Walker, 'Trends in Youth Culture', *Marxism Today* (July 1974), 215–7.

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<sup>48</sup> See also Mills, 'Trends in Youth Culture' (December 1974), 79–80, who insisted that economics, not culture, focus was the party's real concern.

<sup>49</sup> Jeremy Hawthorn, 'The Communist Party and Developments in British Culture', *Marxism Today* (December 1973), 363–6. See also Jim Cornelius, 'Trends in Youth Culture', *Marxism Today* (September 1974), 281–3, who used Lenin to argue similarly and counter Boyd's Leninist credentials.

<sup>50</sup> Paul Fauvet, 'Trends in Youth Culture', *Marxism Today* (March 1974), 93–4.

<sup>51</sup> Nick Kettle, 'Trends in Youth Culture', *Marxism Today* (July 1974), 213–5.

<sup>52</sup> Judy Bloomfield, 'Trends in Youth Culture', *Marxism Today* (February 1973), 61–4. For an obvious example of a counter-cultural text on play and desire, see Neville, *Play Power*.

<sup>53</sup> Imtiaz Chounora, 'Trends in Youth Culture', *Marxism Today* (October 1974), 317–9.

<sup>54</sup> Bloomfield, 'Trends in Youth Culture', 61–4.

<sup>55</sup> Martin Jacques, 'Trends in Youth Culture: Reply to the Discussion', *Marxism Today* (April 1975), 110–16.

<sup>56</sup> CPGB, *The British Road to Socialism* (London 1978). Recognition of the 'specific problems' of young people as a 'social group' was made in the final programme, but very much in political rather than cultural terms. The programme also noted 'areas of oppression' beyond the workplace and provided for the establishment of a 'broad democratic alliance' that linked the class struggle to the 'new social movements'.

<sup>57</sup> YCL, *Our Future: Programme of the Young Communist League* (London 1979). See also YCL, *Our Future: Draft for Discussion* (London 1978), that included Clash song-titles amongst its sub-section headings.

<sup>58</sup> *Anarchy in the UK*, No. 1 (1976), 8. This was a Sex Pistols' fanzine produced by Jamie Reid, Vivienne Westwood, Ray Stevenson and others in late 1976.

<sup>59</sup> Waite, 'Young People and Formal Political Activity'; Worley, 'Shot By Both Sides', 333–54; Smith, 'Are the Kids United?', 85–118; idem, 'When the Party Comes Down', 38–75.

<sup>60</sup> I. Wright, 'New Wave', *Challenge* (March 1977), 7. By 1978, under Steve Munby's editorship, Brendan O'Rourke had become the paper's resident punk record reviewer. For RAR, see Minutes of the Arts and Leisure Committee, 5 May 1978, CP/CENT/CULT/2/7; Dave Cook, 'The British Road to Socialism and the Communist Party', *Marxism Today* (December 1978), 371.

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<sup>61</sup> For discussion titles, see the advert for a YCL event at Charlton House, Greenwich, in *Challenge* (April 1978), 8. See also copies of *Challenge* and *Comment* from the period and the materials gathered for YCL publications in CP/CENT/CULT/2/6. Even the 1979 YCL general council report was presented in a punk-style font and a pen scrawled cover depicting Margaret Thatcher under the slogan 'Tory Freedom = No Future' (CP/CENT/DC/15/09). The song titles referred to here come from The Clash ('White Riot' and 'Complete Control'), Alternative TV ('Love Lies Limp'), Desperate Bicycles ('Medium is the Tedium') and Sham 69 ('Red London').

<sup>62</sup> Hutchinson, 'Women in Punk', 5; Cooper, 'Rock Around the Cock', 10–12; Steward, 'Sound Barriers', 36–7; Kennedy, interview with the Desperate Bicycles, *Challenge*, 5.

<sup>63</sup> Stevenson, 'Anatomy of Decline'; Smith, 'When the Party Comes Down', p. 49.

<sup>64</sup> Letter to the National Executive Committee of the Communist Party from the Haringey YCL Branch, April 1978, CP/CENT/EC/16/04.

<sup>65</sup> Adorno, and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London 1997 edition); T. Adorno, 'On Popular Music', in Frith and Goodwin (eds), *On Record*, 301–14; Cutler, *File Under Popular*. See also smaller leftist periodicals such as *Cogs & Wheels* and *Musics*.

<sup>66</sup> Wise and Wise, 'The End of Music', 63–102 (originally titled 'Punk, Reggae; A Critique', this was published as a pamphlet in 1978 and circulated around anarchist groups in Leeds).

<sup>67</sup> Steve Jefferys, 'The Politics Behind the Row on the Paper', Modern Record Centre, 242/2/1/3; Birchall, *The Smallest Mass Party in the World*. Nor was there any obvious *increase* in the SWP membership registered as the 1970s became the 1980s. John McIlroy suggests the membership remained 'stable' at 4,000 between 1978 and 1980, the peak of RAR. John Callaghan's figures for the International Socialist membership record 3,900 members in 1974. See McIlroy, "'Always Outnumbered, Always Outgunned'", 285; Callaghan, *The Far Left in British Politics*, p. 151 & 205.

<sup>68</sup> 'Which Way for the Punk Rebellion?', *Young Socialist* (4 August 1979), 4; 'Who is Cornelius Cardew?' *NME* (10 September 1977), 11–12;

<sup>69</sup> Marwick, *British Society since 1945*; Osgerby, *Youth in Britain since 1945*; Schildt and Siegfried (eds), *Between Marx and Coca-Cola*, especially the editors' 'Introduction', 1–35.

<sup>70</sup> Minutes of the Arts and Leisure Committee, CP/YCL/21/1; Dave Laing, 'Interpreting Punk Rock', *Marxism Today* (April 1978), 123–8.

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<sup>71</sup> Quoted in *Negative Reaction* (No. 5, 1977), 5.

<sup>72</sup> Caroline Coon, 'Sex Pistols: Rotten to the Core', *Melody Maker* (27 November 1976), 34–5.

<sup>73</sup> I nod here, of course, to Rowbotham, Segal and Wainwright, *Beyond the Fragments*.

<sup>74</sup> Bradshaw, 'Trends in Youth Culture in the 1970s', 4.

<sup>75</sup> Jones, *Chavs*.

<sup>76</sup> For more on this, see Subcultures Network., 'Youth Culture, Popular Music and the End of "Consensus" in Post-War Britain'.

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