

Are the Kids United?

The Communist Party of Great Britain, Rock Against Racism,
and the Politics of Youth Culture

One of the themes that has arisen in the growing body of literature surrounding Rock Against Racism (RAR) and the antiracist campaigns of the late 1970s has been that RAR and its sister organization the Anti-Nazi League (ANL), both offshoots of the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party (SWP), were able to attract politicized youth through the language of youth culture and identity politics, whereas the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), as the traditional home for many left-wing and antiracist activists, looked culturally conservative and apprehensive to the youth-oriented politics of RAR. Through the success of RAR and the ANL in providing widespread opposition to the far right National Front, the SWP established itself as a force on the political Left and an organization of considerable influence in the antiracist movement in Britain. On the other hand, the Communist Party, already plagued by falling membership and internal schisms over the direction of the Party, appeared to be increasingly out of touch with the antiracist movement and with black and white youth, who drifted toward the Trotskyist left or single-issue pressure groups (if politically involved at all). The relationship between the CPGB and the ANL has been examined elsewhere; what this article seeks to explore is how the CPGB's relationship with youth culture became fractured in the late 1970s as Rock Against Racism was able to engage with the emerging youth

cultures of punk and reggae, and how this interaction with youth culture helped to create an antiracist consciousness informed by the politics of the SWP, rather than the CPGB. The decline of the CPGB in the political arena to the left of Labour and its increasing retreat from the forefront of antiracist politics, alongside the rise of the SWP, provides the historical backdrop to demonstrate how radical leftist politics, youth culture, and antiracism converged and diverged in the 1970s.

The Threat of the National Front

Established in the late 1960s, the National Front (NF) was a far-right organization that exploited populist fears about immigration from the British Commonwealth to promote a program that focused heavily on the forced repatriation of nonwhite Britons and violent opposition to the supposed threats to white British society. The NF experienced early peaks of support by disaffected Conservatives in 1968, after Enoch Powell's "rivers of blood" speech, and in 1972, after the Conservative government allowed Asian refugees expelled from Uganda to enter Britain, with membership reaching its highest numbers of between 14,000 and 17,500.¹ However, this support did not translate into tangible gains at the electoral booth, with the NF recording dismal results at the 1970 and (both February and October) 1974 elections. As the economic crisis continued after 1974 elections, the NF started to move away from trying to attract Conservative supporters and began to appeal to traditional Labour Party voters, claiming that nonwhite immigration was responsible for the decrease in employment, housing, and welfare during the economic downturn. This switch to concentrating on attracting working-class support saw the NF change its tactics toward increasing its public presence through provocative street marches and confrontations with antifascist protestors, the police, and Britain's black communities. This push to occupy the streets was combined with a campaign of intimidation, which saw a dramatic increase in violent attacks against Britain's black population, resulting in several deaths and "scores of other similar incidents of unprovoked and savage racist attacks."²

To counter the growing menace of the National Front, numerous anti-fascist and antiracist groups and fronts started to campaign against the NF, including the Communist Party, the Socialist Workers Party (before 1976, the

International Socialists [IS]), and the International Marxist Group (IMG). The CPGB had a long history of antifascist activism, stretching back to the 1930s, but their antifascist strategies in the 1970s reflected a changing attitude toward the institutions of the state and working within the democratic system. Broadly agreeing with the leftist position of “no platform” for fascists, the CPGB promoted peaceful demonstrations against the National Front and working with local government bodies to prevent the NF from making public appearances, warning against physical confrontation with members of the NF or the large numbers of police officers often used to separate NF and antifascist marches. This stood in contrast to the approach of the SWP, who believed that to stop the NF, there needed to be physical confrontation and the active prevention of the NF from taking any kind of foothold in the public domain; the SWP argued that “only mass mobilisation on the streets can defeat fascism.”³ Much has been written on the differences between the strategies of the SWP and the CPGB in the fight against the National Front, but this article will look at a particular aspect of the antifascist, antiracist campaigns of the 1970s, the role of youth culture in creating a radical antiracist consciousness, and why the RAR was successful in its implementation of this approach, while the CPGB attracted little support from black and white youth.

The Emergence of Rock Against Racism

In 1976, the National Front was revived, after a series of internal feuds, by the worsening economic crisis and a new controversy over Asians expelled from Malawi and arriving in Britain. In May 1976, the National Party (NP), who had recently split from the NF, won two council seats in Blackburn, the first elected position won by fascists since the days of the British Union of Fascists, and both the NF and the NP demonstrated at London airports against the arrival of the Malawi Asians. The following month, the *Morning Star* reported that “racial violence has reached a level not seen at least since the events of the autumn of 1958 in Notting Hill and Nottingham.”⁴ It was against this background on growing racial intimidation and the fear of the NF becoming a political force that Rock Against Racism emerged.

There is already a growing body of literature on the history of Rock Against Racism (RAR) and its use of music to raise awareness of racism and mobilize

an antiracist response amongst British youth,⁵ but it is important in this article to outline how RAR was established. The immediate catalyst for the launching of Rock Against Racism was a letter written by some younger activists to the *New Musical Express* (NME), *Melody Maker*, and *Socialist Worker* in response to racist remarks made onstage by Eric Clapton, but as Ian Goodyer wrote in his study of RAR, “they were aware that there were bigger fish to fry than one hypocritical rock star.”⁶ The letter declared:

Rock was and still can be a progressive culture not a package mail order stick-on nightmare of mediocre garbage.

Keep the faith, black and white unite and fight.

We want to organise a rank and file movement against the racist poison in rock music. We urge support for Rock Against Racism.⁷

The major organizers behind RAR were David Widgery, a writer for *Socialist Worker* (the weekly paper of the IS/SWP) and the defunct *Oz*; Roger Huddle, a designer in the *Socialist Worker* artroom; Red Saunders, an “IS fellow-traveller” and part of a theater group called the Kartoon Klowns; and Ruth Gregory and Syd Shelton, both graphic designers.⁸ This group was instrumental in the function of the movement, producing the fanzine *Temporary Hoarding* and other RAR merchandise such as badges, coordinating efforts with the ANL, and organizing RAR shows, at both the local level and the large RAR/ANL carnivals. The major emphasis of music was based on the growing popularity of punk and reggae amongst British youth, but although this music was characterized as radical and confrontational, it was not inherently progressive or leftist, and the National Front attempted to recruit the white youth attracted to punk. As Martin Smith wrote in *Socialist Review* in 2002, “There were no guarantees that punk would become a movement of the left. That had to be argued and fought for.”⁹

In conjunction with RAR, the SWP were instrumental in the formation of the Anti-Nazi League in November 1977, with Paul Holborrow, already a SWP District Organiser, becoming the ANL’s National Organiser, alongside two left Labour MPs, Peter Hain and Ernie Roberts, as the other two full-time members of the ANL. The purpose of the Anti-Nazi League was based on the electoral side of politics—to counter the organization and propaganda of the National Front as the prospect of a General Election loomed in the late

1970s. The ANL believed that the most immediate threat was the “worrying prospect of a Nazi party gaining significant support in Britain” as the NF intended to put forward over 300 candidates at the next general election, declaring, “Ordinary voters must be made aware of the threat that lies behind the National Front.”¹⁰ Supported by musicians, actors, television personalities, and sports stars, amongst many others, both Rock Against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League tapped into popular culture to get the simple message of “the National Front is Nazi”¹¹ out to the British public. Up until the general election in May 1979, the Anti-Nazi League and Rock Against Racism enjoyed immense success as a mass movement against the NF; as Anthony M. Messina wrote, “Not since the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in the 1960s had an extra-parliamentary organization mobilized such a mass following.”¹²

Recognizing that punk was “one of the most important *working class* cultural things to ever happen,”¹³ Rock Against Racism used the appeal of punk and reggae, which were ambiguous and wide-reaching cultural phenomena, to instill an antiracist agenda in British youth. Like the Anti-Nazi League, Rock Against Racism was about spreading the anti-NF and antiracist message and not necessarily about recruitment. “The point of RAR,” Simon Frith and John Street wrote in *Marxism Today* in the mid-1980s, “was not to change a party but to destroy one, the National Front.”¹⁴ The Socialist Workers Party was instrumental in the function of RAR, especially with the production of *Temporary Hoarding*, but unlike its prominent role in the ANL, the SWP was much more restrained in controlling Rock Against Racism. This allowed RAR to freely “work with issues and ideas which fell outside the formal political agenda,”¹⁵ such as celebrating cultural radicalism, the use of punk and reggae music, Dada and Russian Constructivist inspired cut-and-paste fanzines, the influence of 1960s counterculture, and youthful language. However RAR did not abandon traditional leftist politics entirely; Dick Hebdige notes that RAR maintained an “old sense of political priorities and tactics,” such as “marching, changing minds to change the world, exposing and explaining the historical roots of racism in *Temporary Hoarding*, identifying the enemy, ‘raising consciousness.’”¹⁶ As Ian Goodyer has written, the original letter to *NME* called for a “rank and file movement against the racist poison in rock music,” which “echoe[d] the language of the Left and reminds us of the socialist credentials of the letter’s signatories.”¹⁷

Rock Against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League organized a series of

carnivals, beginning with a music festival in Victoria Park on 30 April 1978, combining a number of punk and reggae acts. *The Leveller* described the Carnival, attended by around 80,000 people, as “the highest-decibel rejection of racism and fascism ever to hit the UK.”¹⁸ This was followed by 35,000 attending a carnival in Manchester, then 5,000 in Cardiff, 8,000 in Edinburgh, 2,000 in Harwich, 5,000 in Southampton, 2,000 in Bradford, before another 100,000 attended the second RAR/ANL Carnival in London on 24 September 1978.¹⁹ The SWP estimated that between the two carnivals in London, “something like 400,000 people had been involved in some form of antiracist, antinazi activity.”²⁰

Despite thousands of people attracted to Rock Against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League, drawn by a mixture of antiracist politics and youth culture, and despite its presence at the carnivals, the Communist Party was unable to gain from this upsurge in youthful political radicalism. After the first RAR/ANL Carnival in London in April 1978, the London District Committee of the CPGB acknowledged that the Carnival had brought out many working-class youth, but the Party’s response had been “inadequate,”²¹ and the Lewisham CPGB branch noted that this lack of response showed the problems of the Young Communist League’s work amongst working-class youth.²² As Graham Stevenson remarked in his study of the postwar YCL, despite the mobilization of many young people through RAR/ANL, the YCL “did not profit from these struggles.”²³

The CPGB and Postwar Youth

The Communist Party’s (and the Young Communist League’s) inability to make political inroads with British youth with RAR and punk was not a new phenomenon. Since the mid-1950s, the Communist Party’s relationship with youth and youth culture had become increasingly estranged; this divided the organization of the Young Communist League during the 1960s and 1970s, before the major schism in the CPGB in the 1970s. The objection to the emerging youth culture of the 1950s was a reflection of a wider hostility to American popular culture and the influence of the United States in Western Europe in the Cold War era. The CPGB denounced in the 1951 edition of their postwar program, *The British Road to Socialism*, that “our country has lost

its independence and freedom of action . . . to a foreign power—the United States of America,”²⁴ and a significant part of the Party’s campaign against this “colonisation” was the condemnation of American popular culture. As John Callaghan has written, the critique of American culture allowed the CPGB to celebrate the socialist advances of the Soviet Union and denounce the cultural decadence and materialism of capitalist society, while appealing to the particular national characteristics of British (working-class) culture and pushing for an end to the U.S. armed presence in Britain.²⁵

The Party was particularly concerned about the effect that American culture would have upon British youth and their attitude toward socialism, with Nigel Kelsey writing in the Party’s weekly journal *World News*, “The negative attitudes of a large number of young people are reflected in the great influence of capitalist propaganda, particularly through the films, the popular press and the ‘popcultch.’”²⁶ Geoff Andrews and Mike Waite have shown that this apprehension toward American popular culture extended to popular music and their corresponding subcultures.²⁷ The youth culture of rockers and teddy boys, inspired by pop music from United States, was viewed by many in the Party as a cultural threat to British youth that would reinforce American cultural values, materialist desire, and moral decadence. In a report of a discussion held by the Music Group of the CPGB in 1964, a YCL member was reported to have stated, “pop music has no message; its basic reason for existence is to make a profit for its exploiters.”²⁸

In exchange, the Party favored folk music, which was seen as a “valuable popular weapon with which to combat the brain-softening commercial culture that the masters think fit for the masses” and an alternative for a “wide stratum of youngsters for whom pops and the Twist seem inadequate.”²⁹ As Callaghan explains, folk music songs were viewed as “authentic expressions of working people in economic and political struggle,” and promoted by the Party as a “national and class consciousness alive to the dangers of the American cultural threat.”³⁰ However enthusiasm for pop music grew amongst YCL members throughout the early to mid-1960s and became a point of contention within the YCL over the next decade, but debates over the influence of pop music and popular youth culture reflected wider changes in the YCL (and the CPGB) occurring during this period.

In most histories of the CPGB, discussion of the Young Communist League is very limited and has been traditionally regarded as merely “an element

of [the CPGB's] recruitment machinery" and only nominally independent from the Party itself.³¹ Andrews, in his volume of Lawrence and Wishart's "official" history of the CPGB, and Waite, in his article for the collection of essays on the social and cultural aspects of the Communist Party, *Opening the Books*, have demonstrated how youth culture helped to "problematise"³² the politics of the YCL, with a move toward "mass cultural politics" rather than the "maintenance of a tighter vanguard organization."³³ Both Andrews and Waite depict a strong connection between the growing interest in identity politics within the YCL and the youth culture of the 1960s, and view the YCL as important to the development of an alternative to trade union militancy in the CPGB that rose in the 1970s, with the Gramscian/Eurocommunist "broad democratic alliance" as outlined in the 1977 edition of *The British Road to Socialism*.

A major problem that the YCL (and also the CPGB) faced was the fact that the composition of the YCL membership was changing, with a greater enthusiasm for popular youth culture and identity-based politics. A large number of the young members who had begun joining the Party in the late 1960s had been radicalized by the student activist and feminist movements, reacting against what they viewed as a "narrow 'workerist' position" that "tended to ignore the wider and crucially important of working class youth life, outside the workplace."³⁴ The membership numbers were also shrinking. Despite a massive increase in YCL members in the early 1960s, from 1,796 in 1960 to 6,031 in 1967, this number rapidly dropped to 2,576 by 1974.³⁵ As John Callaghan has written, the problem the Party faced was the fact that it "was not recruiting young workers and had not been doing so since at least the crisis of 1956."³⁶ What kept the Party's membership afloat in this period was not its dynamism, but was, as George Bridges, editor of the YCL's paper *Challenge* and London Secretary of the YCL in the late 1960s, wrote in 1977, "its relative strength, organization and labour movement implantation,"³⁷ which none of the other leftist groups could offer. However, this owed more to "the longevity of its existing membership," argued Kevin Morgan, Gidon Cohen, and Andrew Flinn, than to "its attraction to new layers of activists."³⁸

Martin Jacques, a leading reformer in the CPGB who had been promoted to the Executive Committee in 1968 at the age of 22, explained that three factors contributed to the expansion of youth culture: rising living standards and nearly full employment, a substantial growth in the number of people aged

between 15 and 24 (by 24 percent between 1951 and 1969), and the expansion and greater accessibility to higher education.³⁹ This explosion of youth culture led a “massive revolt by the youth generation,” with some inside the YCL attempting to “develop a politicised relationship with youth culture.”⁴⁰ There were some in the CPGB leadership who viewed this as a potential base for recruitment, but for the most part, the “goals and outlooks formed by the participants in youth subcultures seemed anarchistic, individualistic, and just too new when set against the traditional concerns of the left.”⁴¹

The first divisions between the CPGB and the post-war YCL had been over the “socialist humanism” of the New Left and the appeal of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) to unilateral nuclear disarmament and “peace,” rather than the Communist Party’s loyalty to the Soviet Union.⁴² The disjuncture between the Communist Party and the politics of the New Left had arisen out of the crisis of 1956, which saw the international Communist movement, including the CPGB, fractured by the revelations of the crimes of the Stalin era by Premier Nikita Khrushchev at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and by the Soviet invasion of Hungary in October 1956. In Britain, the Communist Party leadership’s reluctance to examine their uncritical defense of the Soviet Union during the Stalin era and their support of the invasion of Hungary, as well as moves within the Party to stifle any far-reaching discussion of these subjects, led to a third of the CPGB (around 8,000 members) leaving the Party between the February 1956 and February 1958.⁴³ This exodus led many on the left, including a number of young socialists, to eschew party politics, and embrace “socialist humanism” as developed in journals such as *The New Reasoner* and the *Universities & Left Review* (which would combine in 1960 to become the *New Left Review*), as well as to become active in broad single-issue campaigns, such as the CND. The CND brought together activists from varying political backgrounds, combining direct action politics with popular music and other artistic endeavors, which greatly informed politically orientated youth in Britain over the next decade. As David Widgery wrote, “The March [to Aldermaston in the late 1950s] was a student movement before its time, mobile sit-in or marching pop festival; in its midst could be found the first embers of the hashish underground and premature members of the Love Generation as well as cadres of forthcoming revolutionary parties.”⁴⁴ The YCL was inspired by the CND, but the CPGB was reluctant to support the

campaign until 1960,⁴⁵ and the disunity over this support fuelled divisions within the League and the Party over the coming years.

Building on this disunity in the mid to late 1960s, the Vietnam War became the major radicalizing factor for British youth, and the consequences of this radicalization of youth for the CPGB caused divisions between the YCL and the Party. For Jacques, the two major effects of the Vietnam War on British youth were “changing the international outlook of large sections of British youth,” especially in regards to imperialism and socialism, and influencing the attitude toward “the nature British capitalism and the forms of revolutionary struggle at home might take.”⁴⁶ However, the groups that benefited from this radicalism much more than the CPGB were the IMG and the International Socialists, described by Jacques as a “strange combination of neo-Marxism, bourgeois sociology, Trotskyism and anarcho-syndicalism.”⁴⁷

During the 1960s, many members of the YCL proposed that the notion that youth culture could be instrumental in “shaping the contours of political debate,” and in 1967, the YCL launched the campaign “The Trend is Communism,” which “outlined how communist ideals would meet young people’s aspirations.”⁴⁸ The campaign acknowledged that various progressive elements of society, such as “Ban-the-bombers” plus “Oxfam supporters, anti-racialists, protestors and folksingers,” were all looking to change “present day Britain,” but argued that the YCL (and the CPGB) could link these disparate social movements together in the fight for socialism.⁴⁹ Communism was portrayed as progressive and the way forward, with the Soviet bloc described as the “the future, the new in the world,” whereas the “capitalist, colonialist and racist governments [such as Britain] represent[ed] the old, the past.”⁵⁰ Although the main intention of the YCL was to “translate the self-evident mass rebelliousness of the generation into Marxist-Leninist revolutionism,”⁵¹ “The Trend” emphasized other spheres of social conflict, recognizing that most youth did not experience “exploitation” necessarily through economic conflict. As Jacques stated, “because of the nature of the cultural structures of capitalism and the specific oppression of youth, it was always likely . . . that youth would assert its rebellion through . . . forms of cultural involvement.”⁵² However this cultural radicalism was “susceptible to tendencies like subjectivism, individualism, leftism, libertarianism and anarchism.”⁵³

Jacques recognized that most British youth radicalized during the late 1960s were unlikely to see the issues as “class conflict, or indeed, that it will

be consciously expressed as such.”⁵⁴ It was much more likely for them to be involved in single-issue campaigns or social movements, such as women’s liberation, antiracism, or the student movement. During this time the CPGB was competing with the IMG and the International Socialists, as well as these movements and campaigns based on identity politics, and their attempts to recruit toward the Party’s program of parliamentary socialism and industrial militancy were relatively unsuccessful at national level. However those youth who did join the CPGB at this time contributed to the development of new ideas in Party policy and strategy, creating significant debate over the Party’s future political direction and its relationship with popular youth culture.

Cracks within the YCL

Although Trotskyist organizations such as the International Socialists and the International Marxist Group garnered most of the support from the student radicalism of the late 1960s, the YCL was also greatly influenced by the students and young women who joined during this period. The effect of these recruits amongst the student radicals and the wider social movements was not limited to the YCL, but were prominent in the rise in the interest in Gramscism and Eurocommunism within the CPGB in the mid-1970s and in the appeal for major reforms to the Party program. The interest in the work of Antonio Gramsci and Eurocommunism within the YCL and the CPGB extended from a number of young intellectuals within the Party, who viewed Gramscism/Eurocommunism as a viable way to connect the cultural radicalism of the new social movements with the Communist Party’s traditional emphasis on laborist politics and trade union militancy. As the industrial battles of the late 1960s and early 1970s started to ebb after the electoral defeat of the Conservatives in February 1974, a number of Party members felt that the concentration on economic issues had been at the expense of creating links with other movements, based on single-issue campaigns and identity politics. Crucially, a number of people also felt that the stage for political activity by the CPGB on these economic issues was limited, centered around traditional trade union practices, such as working within the factory branches, attending union strikes, demonstrations, and selling the Party’s newspapers—activities that were in decline within the Party at this stage,⁵⁵ and conducted in lieu of

broadening the stage for political activities, which had been embraced by other social movements and the newer Trotskyist groups.

One of the important components of Gramscism and Eurocommunism for these young intellectuals was the notion that the sphere of culture and ideas were central stages in the struggle for socialism, and reflected a complex system of ideological apparatus that both reinforced bourgeois capitalism and allowed points of entry for the promotion of radical and socialist agendas. According to Gramsci, in modern capitalist societies, such as Britain, the state and civil society performed “the function of ‘hegemony’ which the dominant group exercise[d control] throughout society.”⁵⁶ Against these structures and in a time of relative peace, a war of manoeuvre “only leads to defeats.”⁵⁷ To combat the hegemony of the dominant group, a “war of position” is required, where revolutionaries are to occupy strategic positions within the capitalist system, including its cultural artifacts, to create a “counter-hegemony” to the present order.⁵⁸ This notion of the “war of position” was combined with the ideas of Eurocommunism, as developed by other Western European Communist Parties, such as the Communist Party of Italy (PCI) and the Communist Party of Spain (PCE). PCE General Secretary Santiago Carrillo argued in his influential 1977 work, *“Eurocommunism” and the State*, that the crisis of the capitalist system that was occurring in the mid-1970s was “not only in economics and politics but conclusively in the cultural and moral—in other words, the ideological—spheres,” and the task of socialists, the proletariat and other oppressed social groups was to “*turn the weapon of ideology, the ideological apparatuses, against the classes which are in power.*”⁵⁹

This had a dramatic influence upon those in the YCL (and then the Party) who attempted to reform the CPGB. As the Party entered into the downturn of the mid-1970s, these reformers believed that the Party’s emphasis on trade unionism failed to recognize that there were other people within the working class, “oppressed according to their sex, their colour, the social services they use, their age, as young people, where they live,” that were politicized by their “consciousness of oppression, rather than [by] their class exploitation.”⁶⁰ The new social movements were not rejections of class struggle or without trade union support, but worked outside the organized labor movement and demanded immediate actions to redress inequalities and discrimination within the capitalist system. The move by those radicalized in the late

1960s away from what John McIlroy described as the “old axis of the unions, Labour Party and CP” did not mean that class-based activism had become invalid.⁶¹ However, there was a perception among the younger radicals that these traditional organizations were too culturally conservative. Many of them therefore joined the Trotskyist groups of the IS and the IMG,⁶² which competed with the CPGB for support among students and influence in new social movements, or opted to abstain from party politics and involved themselves in various broad-based organizations.

To prevent the Communist Party from becoming irrelevant amongst those radicalized by the events of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and frustrated by the lack of evident gains from nearly a decade of industrial battles, a significant section of Party members pushed for the CPGB to reform the Party’s program to recognize the diverse nature of those involved in political struggles and to widen its strategy away from a narrow focus on industrial militancy.⁶³ Although a number of those promoting reform within the CPGB were inspired by Gramsci, according to Willie Thompson, many more broadly accepted that “political realities could not be explained or analysed purely in terms of class conflict.”⁶⁴ This debate over the CPGB strategy engulfed the Party in the mid-to late 1970s and was a significant factor in the Party’s eventual collapse. This schism in the CPGB should not be perceived as a “Stalinist v. Eurocommunist” divide, as described by some,⁶⁵ but a division between *traditionalists*, who favored the traditional strategies of industrial trade union work (which happened to include a sizeable pro-Soviet section and minor pro-Stalinist faction), and *reformers*, who advocated major changes within the CPGB to address the problems faced by those outside the traditional industrial working-class base, including greater interaction with the new social movements and cultural politics.

Prominent discussion over the engagement with the new social movements, cultural politics, and the influence of Gramsci was first raised by members of the Communist Party in the debate over youth culture within *Marxism Today* between 1973 and 1975. Initiated by an article in 1973 by Martin Jacques, the debate continued until 1975 and, as Mike Waite stated, discussed “many of the deep splits between the traditionalists and modernising, Eurocommunist, currents which were to shape the remaining years of the Party,”⁶⁶ including significant contributions from leading reformers besides Jacques, including Judy Bloomfield and Tom Bell. But the push for greater recognition of

cultural politics in the CPGB reached its peak with the 1977 edition of *The British Road to Socialism*, which demonstrated many Gramscian/Eurocommunist ideals in its outline of the “broad democratic alliance.” The “broad democratic alliance” signified the official, yet highly disputed, acceptance that the struggle for socialism needed “not only . . . to be an association of class forces, . . . but of other important forces in society which emerge out of areas of oppression not always directly connected with the relations of production.”⁶⁷ “Capitalism,” the new edition stated, “not only exploits people at work, but impinges on every aspect of their lives,” so social movements outside the traditional labor movement, such as “black, national, women’s, youth, environmental, peace and solidarity movements,” were considered in the Party’s wider strategy.⁶⁸ Although some considered the new Party program to be a negation of traditional industrial militancy and the surrender of class-based politics to bourgeois individualism, the reformers used the Anti-Nazi League and Rock Against Racism as an example of successful cooperation between the labor movement and the social movements, which they hoped would “trigger off . . . a response from predominantly working-class youth.”⁶⁹ However, the politicization of British youth through Rock Against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League did not draw more youthful support for the Young Communist League or the Communist Party. As James Eaden and David Renton had written, “The Communist Party largely missed the boat on mass antiracist campaigning in the 1970s,” with the ANL/RAR “mobilising a new generation of young radicals into political activity in a setting where the British Communist Party was notably absent.”⁷⁰

At the Carnival, but Absent

The *Morning Star* (the CPGB’s daily newspaper) had reported that unions, trade councils, and the CPGB were all present at the Carnival, but Steve Munby, editor of the YCL’s paper *Challenge* in 1978, pointed out that these organizations “constituted a clear minority.”⁷¹ The organizers of RAR had written in a letter to *Socialist Review* that these traditional political organizations did not “understand [that] working class kids NOW are political and fun without having to make 5 minute speeches to prove it.”⁷² Munby recognized that most young people attended the Carnival for the music, but emphasized

the potential “strong progressive elements” of the music, declaring that punk, reggae, and new wave were “of particular *political* importance.”⁷³ In *Comment*, Paul Bradshaw, editor of *Challenge* from late 1975 to late 1977, wrote that the RAR/ANL Carnival was “critical because they’ve broken out of the traditional political approach,” describing them as a “fusion of cultural rebellion and political action.”⁷⁴ Bradshaw saw the role of the Carnival as important, but stated that local and regional RAR events were “vital elements in carrying the fight [against racism] forward.”⁷⁵ This point is not elaborated upon by Bradshaw and was rarely, if ever, mentioned in other CPGB literature on Rock Against Racism or the Anti-Nazi League.

The importance of Rock Against Racism was its focus upon local-based actions, with many smaller gigs organized that were not connected to the major RAR/ANL Carnivals. At the height of the RAR/ANL campaigns in 1978, there were 300 Rock Against Racism shows, alongside the major Carnivals, as well as another 23 shows on the Militant Entertainment Tour in the months before the 1979 general election.⁷⁶ However, young CPGB/YCL members were more likely to be involved in separate events run by the Communist Party, such as the People’s Jubilee at Alexandra Palace in June 1977, than with Rock Against Racism. In a briefing document on antiracist activities for Party branches produced by the CPGB’s National Student Committee (NSC), the Party saw youth events as “basically political or cultural,” rather than being able to fuse the two elements.⁷⁷ Although the NSC advised contacting “all the social, cultural, political and religious groups and societies” to seek contributions to the event, these antiracist “festivals” were very much seen as run by the Communist Party, and little interaction was had with Rock Against Racism, besides the briefing document advising that RAR “have a lot of good stuff including badges.”⁷⁸

Although the CPGB and YCL had debated the importance of youth culture in the pages of *Marxism Today* in 1973–1974, the YCL (or the Party itself) was slow to acknowledge the role of new music, such as punk, in youth culture in the late 1970s. In June 1976, Paul Bradshaw claimed, “Generally the music of the seventies, has . . . not been of the youth and does not reflect the overt struggles they are involved in,” although he stated that reggae was “undoubtedly the most militant, political music around.”⁷⁹ At the same time that punk was emerging and a month before the riot at the 1976 Notting Hill Carnival, Bradshaw lamented, “Certainly within the existing deep crisis of capitalism, one

would expect new forms of culture, especially through music, to develop and give expression to the problems facing youth.”⁸⁰ Although Bradshaw thought this “ha[d] not been the case so far,” he did warn, as did Rock Against Racism organizers, of the “danger of a rightward swing amongst young people.”⁸¹ However, while the YCL worked within the traditional socialist “festivals” arena, Rock Against Racism mobilized youth for an antiracist movement, with its first letter published in September 1976 and the first RAR show performed on 10 December 1976.⁸² An anonymous YCL member from London had written in *Challenge* in June 1976 that “[t]he left ignore popular culture at their peril,”⁸³ but the YCL (and the CPGB) were slow to realize the potential of punk and reggae, as popular youth cultures, to mobilize antiracist and antifascist activism. Although it had some presence in the Anti-Nazi League, the Communist Party, besides paper sales at the RAR/ANL carnivals and strong coverage of RAR/ANL events in the *Morning Star*, had little input into Rock Against Racism. Some Communist Party members admired and supported RAR, viewing it as a demonstration of the broad democratic alliance, and the Political Committee described the RAR/ANL Carnival as the “biggest, most inspiring and politically important demonstration for some years,”⁸⁴ but this support was different from actual involvement.

RAR as a Template for the “Broad Democratic Alliance”

Rock Against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League were largely successful in publicizing the Nazi elements of the National Front and eroding popular support for them through the massive dissemination of anti-NF propaganda, with 5.25 million leaflets and a million badges and stickers distributed during the first year of the ANL’s existence.⁸⁵ Although successful in distributing the anti-NF message amongst British youth, the momentum of RAR (and the ANL) was temporary, and there was concern about the future political involvement of the antiracist activists and supporters inspired by RAR and the ANL. And even as the SWP celebrated their role as central to the success of RAR and the ANL, they were wary about whether this broad antiracist coalition could be useful for long-term political activism. As Ian Birchall wrote of the lessons of Rock Against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League in *International Socialism*:

[H]ow do the revolutionaries act to build a successful broad front, but at the same time recruit to their own organization, the only effective way of constructing a barrier against reformist influence?⁸⁶

For the SWP, the danger of the success of Rock Against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League was the creation of a Popular Front strategy, at the expense of its own political program, which was the formation of a revolutionary socialist party.⁸⁷

The Communist Party also negotiated between the merits of broad coalition politics and recruitment to an individual political organization with a more defined agenda. The Party had warned in its other literature about attempting to promote explicit CPGB policies in other broad organizations,⁸⁸ but it still emphasized amongst its members that recruitment needed attention, especially as membership numbers had dwindled to 25,293 in 1977, then 20,599 in 1979.⁸⁹ The Lewisham CPGB branch noted in its May 1978 minutes that it was evident at the RAR/ANL carnival in Victoria Park that there was a problem with the CPGB's inability to implement its own strategy and remarked that the presence of the SWP "shows [the] need to build [a] People's Front."⁹⁰ But many traditionalists in the Party sought for a Popular Front, what was described as the "broad popular alliance" in *The British Road to Socialism* before 1977,⁹¹ along traditional political lines of industrial militancy and Party building in the trade union movement.

The reformers within the CPGB, who were beginning to congregate around the Party journal *Marxism Today* under the editorship of Martin Jacques,⁹² saw Rock Against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League as important templates for how to build broad alliances without a dependency on the language of strictly class-based politics. Writing in *Marxism Today* in January 1979, Stuart Hall described Rock Against Racism as "one of the timeliest and best constructed of cultural interventions" and the "direct interventions against the rising fortunes of the National Front" was "one of the few success stories" of a demoralized Left.⁹³ Although he was not an actual member of the CPGB, Hall was an important intellectual activist for the Party reformers. He depicted the broad alliances formed against the NF, primarily the work of Rock Against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League, as a prime example of the strategy outlined in *The British Road to Socialism*, and encouraged readers of *Marxism Today* to see the shift to the right that was occurring in British

society, with the NF and rise of Margaret Thatcher, as more than “a simple expression of the economic crisis,”⁹⁴ which demanded different strategies than traditional class-based militancy. Hall argued that the Communist Party, like many on the Left and within the labor movement, was unable to recognize the ideological and cultural activism that epitomized by RAR had to be expanded to the ideological shift to the right, what Hall described as “a decisive shift in the balance of hegemony,” that was represented by the National Front and the much larger threat of Thatcherism.⁹⁵

Although some within the Communist Party and the YCL were realizing the importance of the “sphere of music and culture” in mobilizing young people and those involved in other social movements,⁹⁶ as well as the potential relationships that could be built with the organized Left, it was an inescapable fact that the CPGB was in decline and whatever strategy was put forward by the Party’s reformers, the influence of the CPGB over practical political activism had significantly diminished. With membership just over 20,000 in 1979 (further declining to 18,458 by 1981),⁹⁷ diminished workplace presence, and internal divisions between the traditionalists and the reformers, the CPGB was hardly in a position to, as Martin Jacques hoped, “transform the labour movement and popular consciousness.”⁹⁸ “The biggest single weakness of the Party’s practice,” stated Jacques in October 1979, was to “underestimate the extent of the crisis and the range of issues around which popular support can be mobilised.”⁹⁹ The reformers had hoped that popular support could be drawn from greater cooperation with other social movements and involvement in nonsectarian cultural events, like the RAR/ANL Carnivals, where “popular” culture and “Communist” culture were not contradictory concepts. As Sarah Benton wrote, “In place of the split persona of the 1950s, today’s communist could allow her interest in television or reggae or sex to elide with her commitment to changing the world.”¹⁰⁰ But this optimism was belied by the decline of the CPGB from its former position of influence and the wider crisis of the Left after the convincing victory of Margaret Thatcher in May 1979.

Mixing Pop and Politics in the 1980s: The Declining Fortunes of the Left

The cultural and political impact of Rock Against Racism, and the Anti-Nazi League in general, highlighted the role that youth culture could have in attracting attention to new social movements and areas of progressive politics. Youth culture addressed people on the periphery of the political arena in ways that the traditional organizations of the Left, the labor movement, and progressive politics could not. These organizations relied on established structures and channels that had become increasingly entrenched in practice, overwhelmingly dominated by older (and often also white and male) members, while younger people became more unlikely to join. This is particularly so with the Communist Party, but also experienced by most labor and left-wing organizations during this period. The use of popular youth culture did not inherently lend itself to more identity-based politics than the traditional class-based politics of the British labor movement, but the use of destructuralized and more immediately accessible means, such as the musical styles of punk and reggae, were more likely to be embraced by those who sought to form broader alliances with other social movements, where the personal was becoming more political. The British labor movement, in particular the Labour Party, had “previously underestimated the importance of culture and its significance in everyday life, concentrating on economic questions such as wages and the standard of living.”¹⁰¹ As Jeremy Tranmer has written:

[The Labour Party’s] main contribution to British culture and everyday life is the Trades and Labour Club which conjures up images of middle-aged men drinking beer and playing snooker and has a rather limited appeal.¹⁰²

In the CPGB, those who most heartedly embraced the means of popular culture were the Party reformers, who had risen from the YCL to the main Party during the cultural radicalism of the 1970s, and had become a more dominant force in the Party during the 1980s. One of the focal points of the Party reformers became the CPGB’s theoretical journal *Marxism Today*, which publicized the combination of popular youth culture and progressive, left-wing politics. In the “New Times” of the 1980s, as perceived by those

centered around *Marxism Today*, music and popular youth culture were important avenues for bringing more people into the political arena. The journal demonstrated support behind initiatives, such as Red Wedge, that saw musicians such as The Jam/The Style Council's Paul Weller, Billy Bragg, and Bronski Beat/The Communards' Jimmy Somerville use pop music to promote the Labour Party as a popular alternative to Thatcherism in the mid-1980s, leading up to the 1987 general election. Although it must be noted that many consider that Red Wedge was not as successful as Rock Against Racism, with John Street and Simon Frith pointing to the facts that the Conservatives won the 1987 election and youth issues were largely ignored by the Labour Party leadership, but also acknowledging that quantifying success for cultural movements like Red Wedge "depends on what purpose we attribute to it."¹⁰³ Despite the inspiration it took from RAR and the involvement of musicians like Billy Bragg and The Specials' Jerry Dammers (who was an influential person within Artists Against Apartheid and had composed the song "Free Nelson Mandela"), Red Wedge was less "organic" than its predecessor and constrained by its relationship to the "established electoral purposes of the [Labour] Party."¹⁰⁴

Although initiatives like Rock Against Racism, the Anti-Nazi League, and to a lesser extent Red Wedge reached many people outside the conventional structures of the Left and were highly successful in promoting a progressive political message, the work focusing on popular youth culture was not an all-effective antidote to the decline experienced by the British labor movement in the 1980s and beyond. The Socialist Workers Party, who was the most influential in setting up Rock Against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League, did not benefit from these initiatives in terms of membership, which stayed relatively steady throughout the 1980s. Exact membership figures for the SWP during this period are difficult to locate, but according to John McIlroy's research, SWP membership in 1978 (at the height of the RAR/ANL movement) was 4,200 and then 4,100 in 1980, whereas other sources state that "[o]ver the next few years the party lost small groups but appears to have consolidated at this level."¹⁰⁵ Sales of the SWP's weekly paper *Socialist Worker* did rise during the early 1980s, to 31,000 in 1984–1985,¹⁰⁶ but this may be more attributable to the more confrontational politics of Thatcher's Conservative government rather than any lasting appeal of Rock Against Racism or the Anti-Nazi League. It should be noted that political

success cannot be measured by membership figures and paper sales alone, and although the SWP was proud of its instrumental involvement in RAR/ANL—as Tony Cliff once stated in *The Leveller*, “The leadership of the ANL is in reality the SWP and we don’t hide it, we don’t give a damn”¹⁰⁷—it quickly became part of the Party’s history, alongside rank-and-fileism, as the concept of the “downturn” dominated the SWP’s political program during the Thatcher years.¹⁰⁸ Like the Communist Party’s use of the legacy of the Battle of Cable Street, the famous antifascist demonstration from the late 1930s, the history of the Anti-Nazi League was a morale-boosting story for the Party faithful, but it wasn’t necessarily attracting new members.

As the SWP’s membership numbers seemed to plateau during the 1980s, the reformers’ promotion of broad alliances with other social movements and alternative channels for political activism, such as Rock Against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League, did not help the Communist Party from its accelerating decline. The Thatcher years had a dramatic effect upon the Communist Party. The reformers in the CPGB saw Thatcherism as more than merely a continuation of previous Conservative governments, representing a wider ideological shift to the right, and they believed that this rightward shift needed to be addressed in a much more pluralistic manner than the traditional laborist politics of the organized labor movement. On the other hand, Party traditionalists pushed for greater industrial militancy against the Thatcherite government, looking to recreate the victories of the strikes of the early 1970s against Edward Heath. The schisms that had been formed in the late 1970s widened during the 1980s, polarizing the Communist Party between the reformers, centered around *Marxism Today*, and the industrialist wing, centered around the *Morning Star*, with the defeat of the Miners’ Strike in 1985 exacerbating the factional split into a terminal divide.

The defeat of the strike further demoralized the traditionalists within the CPGB, who were already in open conflict with the reformers in the Party leadership and had suffered from the leading traditionalists being expelled by the Executive Committee. Although the CPGB leadership and *Marxism Today* supported the strike, the assumptions of the reformers of the limited usefulness of industrial militancy, at the expense of other strategies, seemed to be further validated by the strike’s defeat. Hastened by the internal Party splits, the Communist Party’s membership rapidly declined. The 1981 membership of 18,458 had fallen to 12,711 in 1985 at the end of the Miners’ Strike, then to a

mere 7,615 in 1989 by the time the Soviet bloc in Eastern Europe collapsed.¹⁰⁹ By this stage, the Party reformers had issued a new CPGB program, *The Manifesto for New Times*, which pushed for greater emphasis on strategies to counter Thatcherism *ideologically* rather than utilizing the traditional organs of the labor movement.¹¹⁰ This approach was described by critics as a defeatist attitude and a vindication of Thatcherism. A. Sivanandan, who had previously criticized the Left for its failure to address issues other than the class politics of industrial militancy, wrote in *Race & Class* in 1989:

New Times is a fraud, a counterfeit, a humbug. It palms off Thatcherite values as socialist, shores up the Thatcherite market with the pretended politics of choice, fits out the Thatcherite individual with progressive consumerism, makes consumption itself the stuff of politics. New Times is a mirror image of Thatcherism passing for socialism. New Times is Thatcherism in drag.¹¹¹

This shift away from utilizing the structures of the labor movement and a shift toward a broad-based and ideological campaign against Thatcherism eventually contributed, along with other practical problems experienced across the British Left in the 1980s and early 1990s, to the Party “rump” speculating whether there was a need for the CPGB to continue in its present form. In November 1991, the Communist Party of Great Britain dissolved itself.

Several reformers who had written for *Marxism Today* gravitated toward the Labour Party, itself undertaking a process of “modernisation” under John Smith and then Tony Blair toward “New Labour,” although two of the most important reformers, Martin Jacques and Stuart Hall, did not become involved in this project. The “progressive consumerism” and “pretended politics of choice” that Sivanandan warned about in 1989 were enshrined in the politics of New Labour in the lead-up to the 1997 general election. By now, popular youth culture had been embraced by politics wholeheartedly, but the radical edge that had drawn thousands of youth toward antiracist activism through Rock Against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League now seemed to be blunted. In 1997, Martin Cloonan and John Street noted that Tony Blair and John Prescott were associating themselves with rock musicians, like Oasis, comedians David Baddiel and Frank Skinner (who had gained fame through their *Fantasy Football* television show and their song for the 1996 Euro Cup, “Three Lions”), and the cast of *Coronation Street* (a long-running soap opera

set in Manchester), whereas the Conservatives used The Beatles' song "Come Together" as their conference anthem—the "previously established boundaries between *conventional* politics and popular culture" had now been blurred.¹¹² Cloonan and Street wrote:

The ruthless focus on image . . . , the style of party political broadcasts (modelled on the pop video and the advert), the formats adopted for "meet the people" sessions (borrowed from Oprah Winfrey)—all are self-conscious attempts to learn from and to use popular culture. Think of the soundbite as the catchy hook of a pop song.

These techniques chime with a larger shift in the political landscape, where cultural issues have tended to replace material ones . . . Consumption has been redescribed as a form of political participation.¹¹³

The difference between the use of popular youth culture by Rock Against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League (and even Red Wedge) and the examples of the appropriation of popular culture by mainstream politics in the late 1990s was that in the former, the use of popular culture was only one of a number of different strategies used to attract people to radical political activism, often combined with more traditional ventures, like demonstrations and leafleting, whereas in the latter, the use of popular culture became a substitute for many forms of political engagement. And no one seemed immune—even George Galloway, an MP for Respect, a left-wing coalition between the SWP and other antiracist/antiwar organizations in Britain, joined the cast of Channel 4's reality TV show *Celebrity Big Brother* in 2005.¹¹⁴

With each new phenomenon in popular culture embraced by youth, it seems that some on the Left believe it to be a new path for invigorating a declining connection between leftist politics and youth, whereas others dismiss these new developments as fads that distract the Left from its primary political duties. In 1981, David Widgery wrote about the passion inspired by music in the 1980s:

What is required of the political Left is the imagination, the patience and the political clarity to relate to all that passion . . . Otherwise we are waltzing with ourselves in a political hulk which may look imposing but which is sinking under the dead weight outmoded cultural and political forms.¹¹⁵

Even while embracing these new cultural forms, it was important that the Left not dismiss entirely the political activities that reached people in other ways, such as marches, newspapers, and localized political activism, in the community or the workplace. This is what the reformers in the CPGB were accused of doing in the 1980s, but what *Marxism Today* demonstrated was the need to acknowledge the importance of culture and ideology in political activism, but not at the expense of traditional left-wing strategies. A multifaceted approach, using popular youth culture, may reach new audiences, but the remaining question for the Left, at the time of Rock Against Racism as it is today, is how to transform this into positive political actions. As the blog *A Very Public Sociologist* proclaimed about the Twitter phenomenon recently:

Like all social media you get out of it as much as you're willing to put into it. Twitter does not offer leftists an internet shortcut to "fresh layers" or young people . . . But it can be used to bring together numbers of like minded people . . . Twitter is no substitute for offline activism or the existing internet presence leftists have built up, but it can be a useful annex to them.¹¹⁶

Similar issues are raised over antifascist strategies in Britain today. Over the last decade, the British National Party (BNP), the far right successor of the National Front, made electoral inroads, reaching its electoral height with the winning of two seats in the 2009 European Parliament elections. These limited electoral gains caused a series of debates within the antifascist movement and the Left over the strategies used to combat the BNP, often intertwined with reflections on the relative successes of the Anti-Nazi League and Rock Against Racism thirty years ago. Within these debates, the issue was raised of whether cultural political initiatives, such as Love Music, Hate Racism (LMHR), the contemporary incarnation of Rock Against Racism, are beneficial for the antifascist movement. Amongst much of the criticism of initiatives like LMHR, it seems to be portrayed as a binary choice between *either* traditional political tactics, such as community and trade union activism and other "consciousness raising" activities, *or* cultural projects, such as holding festivals and events that link political ideas with music, youth culture, and other forms of entertainment, with investment in either tactic viewed as a zero sum game. This can be seen in comments made by Nick Lowles,

editor of long-running, antifascist magazine *Searchlight*, in mid-2008, who told *Red Pepper* magazine:

I'm just not sure concerts are the most effective way of stopping the BNP . . . The event cost a huge amount of money and we have to ask was it the best use? In the same week the *Daily Mirror* ran an eight-page anti-BNP spread paid for by the trade unions. It cost half the amount of the carnival and will have a massive impact in comparison.¹¹⁷

Another article in *Red Pepper*, published after the BNP's electoral victories in the European Parliament in mid-2009, made a similar argument: "Energy and resources channelled into LMHR would be better off directed at helping to deal with the problems working-class communities face as part and parcel of squeezing the BNP."¹¹⁸ Statements like these seem to assume that the only purpose of cultural projects within the antifascist/antiracist movement is to stop the BNP from making further gains in the electoral arena. However, many would argue that the purpose of projects like LMHR is much more long-term, introducing younger people to wider ideas of antiracism, social justice and taking an active interest in politics. As Lena de Casparis and Alex Nunns have argued, "In the short-term, it might not have hurt the BNP like Rock Against Racism hurt the National Front. But it communicated a message [of antiracism] to thousands of teenagers."¹¹⁹ This diffuse and mainly unquantifiable objective may frustrate many traditional antifascist and leftist activists, but as the history of the CPGB and Rock Against Racism has demonstrated, it would be unwise to dismiss strategies that tap into contemporary youth culture. The choice for the Left today, as it has been since the 1950s, is (taking a phrase from Homi Bhabha, albeit in a different context) "neither the one nor the other"¹²⁰ but a negotiation of strategies that embrace both traditional political activism and popular youth culture.

Conclusion

Rock Against Racism was a considerably successful combination of radical politics and youth culture in the late 1970s, which sought to bring together black and white youth to raise an antiracist consciousness through the fusion

of punk and reggae audiences. Primarily responsible for the success of RAR, and its sister organization the ANL, was the Trotskyist SWP; whereas the CPGB, which had previously been an influential force in postwar, antiracist campaigning, seemed to flounder and was unable to attract support from those involved in RAR/ANL events. One of the major reasons for the CPGB's isolation from the political milieu surrounding Rock Against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League was its failure to recognize how emerging youth cultures, such as punk and reggae, traditionally viewed as anarchic or nihilistic, could be used as important vehicles for promoting antiracist (and forms of other progressive) politics. However this uneasy relationship between the CPGB and youth culture in the late 1970s was not a new phenomenon.

Since the 1960s, the Communist Party, and its youth wing the Young Communist League, had found the correlation between popular youth culture and leftist politics problematic. Many in the Party viewed youth culture as detrimental to British youth, who were supposedly more interested in bourgeois individualism and identity politics than ascertaining a class-based consciousness. As the late 1960s and early 1970s saw many youth politicized around issues such as the Vietnam War, women's rights, student politics, and antiracism, more people within the CPGB, especially in the YCL, came to view popular culture as a way to interact with British youth and bridge the gap between the Party and other social movements, although there was still much resistance from Party traditionalists. By the late 1970s, when Rock Against Racism was emerging, the use of youth culture was becoming more accepted by the Party, as the CPGB itself established the "broad democratic alliance" as its strategy. However, this was countered by the fact that the Communist Party was now in disarray, with plummeting membership figures and a widening split between the reformers and the traditionalists, and this meant that any progressive strategies undertaken by the CPGB to interact with youth cultures and social movements, such as Rock Against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League, were hindered by a Party that was becoming increasingly irrelevant within British radical politics.

This article highlights a narrative of a political opportunity lost by the Communist Party of Great Britain, where antiracism obtained a massive public awareness through the combination of youth culture and politics by RAR, yet politicized youth drifted toward the SWP or other single-issue campaigns rather than toward the more culturally conservative CPGB.

Eventually the initiative of using popular youth culture to attract people to a radical political message was appropriated by the major political parties, as the CPGB itself dissolved and the SWP remained static for nearly a decade. This historical episode can serve as a microcosm for understanding how the Left, in its different guises, has engaged with popular youth culture since the 1950s, a narrative that is not merely “history for history’s sake” but remains an issue widely debated in contemporary times.

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42. Waite, “Sex ’n’ Drugs ’n’ Rock ’n’ Roll (and Communism) in the 1960s,” 213–14.
43. “Communist Party Membership,” CP/CENT/ORG/19/04, LHASC; Henry Pelling, *The British Communist Party: A Historical Profile* (London: A & C Black, 1975), 193.
44. David Widgery, *The Left in Britain: 1956–1968* (London: Penguin Books, 1976), 104.
45. For more information on the fraught relationship between the CPGB/YCL and the CND, see Nigel Young, *An Infantile Disorder? The Crisis and Decline of the New Left* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), 153–57; Callaghan, *Cold War, Crisis and Conflict*, 274–76; Andrews, *Endgames and New Times*, 30–34; Waite, “Sex ’n’ Drugs ’n’ Rock ’n’ Roll (and Communism) in the 1960s,” 211–12.
46. Jacques, “Trends in Youth Culture,” 273–74.

47. Jacques, "Trends in Youth Culture," 275.
48. Andrews, *Endgames and New Times*, 39, 35.
49. YCL, *The Trend—Communism*, YCL flyer (1967).
50. YCL, *The Trend*.
51. Waite, "Sex 'n' Drugs 'n' Rock 'n' Roll (and Communism) in the 1960s," 218.
52. Jacques, "Trends in Youth Culture," 270–71.
53. Jacques, "Trends in Youth Culture," 276.
54. Martin Jacques, "Trends in Youth Culture: A Reply to the Discussion," *Marxism Today*, April 1975, 111–12.
55. See Callaghan, "Industrial Militancy, 1945–79," 404–9.
56. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), 12.
57. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 238.
58. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 243.
59. Santiago Carrillo, *"Eurocommunism" and the State* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1977), 45, emphasis added.
60. Dave Cook, "The British Road to Socialism and the Communist Party," *Marxism Today*, December 1978, 371.
61. John McIlroy, "Notes on the Communist Party and Industrial Politics," in *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics*, vol. 2, *The High Tide of Trade Unionism, 1964–79*, eds. John McIlroy, Nina Fishman, and Alan Campbell (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 224.
62. This does not mean that all of the Trotskyist groups were inherently more culturally progressive than the CPGB. Two of the largest Trotskyist groups in Britain at this time were the Socialist Labour League (after 1973, the Workers Revolutionary Party) and Militant, which were both as culturally conservative and apprehensive toward the new social movements as the Communist Party. See John Callaghan, *British Trotskyism: Theory and Practice* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), 172–73; Lucy Robinson, *Gay Men and the Left in Post-War Britain: How the Personal Got Political* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 99–100.
63. For further discussion of this movement for reform inside the CPGB and its interpretation since the 1980s, see Evan Smith, "Industrial Militancy, Reform and the 1970s: A Review of Recent Contributions to CPGB Historiography," *Flinders Journal of History and Politics* 23 (2006): 16–32.
64. Willie Thompson, *The Good Old Cause: British Communism 1920–1991* (London: Pluto Press, 1992), 165.
65. Keith Laybourn and Dylan Murphy, *Under the Red Flag: A History of Communism in*

- Britain, c. 1849–1991* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1999), 168; Francis Beckett, *Enemy Within: The Rise and Fall of the British Communist Party* (London: Merlin Press, 1998), 192.
66. Waite, "Sex 'n' Drugs 'n' Rock 'n' Roll (and Communism) in the 1960s," 218.
 67. CPGB, *The British Road to Socialism* (London: CPGB pamphlet, 1977), 29.
 68. CPGB, *The British Road to Socialism* (1977), 29.
 69. Cook, "The British Road to Socialism and the Communist Party," 378.
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 75. Bradshaw, "Carnivals & Confrontations," 328.
 76. Andy Xerox, "And They Still Say Wanking Will Turn You Blind," *Temporary Hoarding* 8 (March–April 1979): 2; "RAR Militant Entertainment Tour '79," *Temporary Hoarding* 8 (March–April 1979): 6.
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 79. Paul Bradshaw, "Trends in Youth Culture in the 1970's," *Cogito* 3 (1976): 12, CP/YCL/21/01, LHASC.
 80. Bradshaw, "Trends in Youth Culture in the 1970's," 12.
 81. Bradshaw, "Trends in Youth Culture in the 1970's," 12.
 82. Renton, *When We Touched the Sky*, 34.
 83. "Bowie," *Challenge* 35 (June–July 1976): 8.
 84. CPGB PC Weekly Letter, 3 May 1978, CP/CENT/CIRC/68/07, LHASC.
 85. Messina, *Race and Party Competition in Britain*, 119.
 86. Ian Birchall, "Only Rock and Roll? A Review of D Widgery, *Beating Time*," *International Socialism* 2, no. 33 (Autumn 1986): 127.
 87. SWP, *The Fight Against Fascism and for Socialism* (London: SWP pamphlet, n.d.), 14–15.
 88. NRRRC, *Racism: How to Combat It* (London: CPGB pamphlet, 1978), 3.
 89. Thompson, *The Good Old Cause*, 218.
 90. Minutes of Lewisham CPGB Branch in Diary Planner, 15 May 1978, CP/LON/LEW/02/07, LHASC.
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 92. *Marxism Today* had originally been established by the CPGB leadership in 1958 to provide an officially sanctioned environment for debate by Party members in the wake of the crisis of

1956, when leading dissenting members E. P. Thompson and John Saville had independently published *The Reasoner*, which circumvented Party rules on inner-party discussion and democratic centralism. It was originally under the editorship of the Party's General Secretary, John Gollan. James Klugmann, a loyal Party member and official historian of the CPGB, was editor of the journal from 1962 until his retirement in 1977, before Martin Jacques, the leading reformer, took over the helm and used the journal to regenerate debate amongst the left in the 1980s. Jacques's appointment as editor, alongside Sarah Benton's editorship of the weekly CPGB journal *Comment* and Dave Cook's appointment as the Party's National Organiser, signified the height of the Gramscian/Eurocommunist influence within the Party after the 1977 edition of *The British Road to Socialism*. The journal was one of the few success stories of the Communist Party in the 1980s and was instrumental in fostering discussions over the future of left and the Labour Party under Thatcherism. Its broad scope and theoretical developments have led to many on the British left to view *Marxism Today* as a revisionist vehicle that is partly responsible for the ideological development of New Labour, although as Andrew Gamble has noted, Jacques and fellow *MT* writer Stuart Hall have "delivered a passionate denunciation of New Labour . . . , refusing to recognise it as in any sense a legitimate exponent of the new politics which he had advocated in the 1980s." Andrew Gamble, "New Labour and Old Debates," in *After Blair: Politics After the New Labour Decade*, ed. Gerry Hassan (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2007), 31. See also Alex Callinicos, "The Politics of *Marxism Today*," *International Socialism* 2, no. 29 (Summer 1985): 128–68; Herbert Pimlott, "From the Margins to the Mainstream: The Promotion and Distribution of *Marxism Today*," *Journalism* 5, no. 2 (2004): 203–26; Herbert Pimlott, "Write Out of the Margins: Accessibility, Editorship and House Style in *Marxism Today*, 1957–91," *Journalism Studies* 7, no. 5 (2006): 784; Martin Jacques, "Introduction," *Marxism Today Archive*, May 2006, http://www.amielandmelburn.org.uk/collections/mt/index_frame.htm (accessed June 2011).

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 104. Frith and Street, "Rock Against Racism and Red Wedge," 74, 78.
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