When the party comes down: the CPGB and youth culture, 1976-1991

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I n 1981, Verso, in association with *Marxism Today*, published *The Forward March of Labour Halted?*, a collection of articles that had mainly previously been featured in the journal, in a discussion triggered by Eric Hobsbawm's 1978 Marx Memorial Lecture. Alongside Stuart Hall's 'The Great Moving Right Show', which featured in *Marxism Today* in January 1979, Hobsbawm's paper had been part of a massive debate within the CPGB (as well as the wider labour movement) over the strategy for the struggle for socialism in the 1980s. Another Conservative electoral victory was looking ever more likely at this time, which only added to the debates that were raging over the controversial redrafting of the party's *British Road to Socialism* programme in 1977. When the book appeared Hobsbawm wrote in his postscript to the debate,

> The future of labour and the advance to socialism depends on mobilizing people who remember the date of the Beatles' break up and not the date of the Saltley pickets.[1]

But for the youth of the early 1980s, the Beatles (as well as the counter-culture of the 1960s) were of little importance. Youth culture had undergone significant changes – the rise and fall of punk, the emergence of the various forms of post-punk, the revival of 'Mod' and ska subcultures – and the politics surrounding youth had also been transformed – the campaigns of Rock Against Racism (RAR) and the Anti-Nazi League (ANL) were winding down, youth unemployment had risen greatly under the Conservatives, and the summer of 1981 had seen widespread riots across Britain. The quote from Hobsbawm shows us that many on

the left, especially those in leadership roles and including those driving
the new debates about strategy, were out of touch with the concerns of
British youth and contemporary youth culture. All too often they used
now out of date historical precedents (such as the rock 'n' roll
phenomenon of the 1950s or the counterculture of '1968', and later the
punk rock explosion) in order to interpret youth culture in the present.
As Mark Perryman wrote in 1985, 'For the benefit of the 68 generation,
I'd just like to remind them that Woodstock took place 16 years ago …
The Left has this obsession with looking backwards, it's about time we
looked forward …'.[2]

   This article will examine how the CPGB interacted with particular
youth subcultures (such as punk, hip hop/rap and acid house/rave) and
popular youth culture more generally in the party's final years. The
arrival of punk in the late 1970s had coincided with the rise of a more
culturally aware group within the CPGB, inspired by Gramscism and
Eurocommunism, who saw youth culture as a potential vehicle for
creating a political awareness amongst young people, and events such as
Rock Against Racism as opening up new avenues for radical politics to
reach this demographic. This enthusiasm for youth culture had coin-
cided with a wider push in the party for a more pluralistic approach to
left-wing politics, moving away from putting primary emphasis on
industrial militancy and building the organised labour movement. On
the other hand, many within the CPGB were dismissive, unconvinced or
unaware of this approach to youth culture, which was often seen by party
traditionalists as consumerist, individualistic and hedonistic. For the
reformers in the party, the success of Rock Against Racism and the Anti-
Nazi League proved that popular youth culture (in particular punk and
reggae) could attract typically non-political youth towards a greater
awareness and involvement in politics. However, the examples of
RAR/ANL and the subcultures of punk and reggae had created a partic-
ular framework for the interaction between youth culture and radical
politics, which continued to frame the way in which the CPGB related
to subsequent subcultures and wider popular culture in the 1980s. Thus,
although the reformers within the party, centred around the journal
Marxism Today and heavily influential in the Young Communist League,
were more receptive of emerging subcultures, such as hip hop/rap and

acid house/rave, their political 'usefulness' was often seen through the prism of the 1970s example of punk and reggae, and their particular links to anti-racist politics. This article will assess how this approach by the CPGB related to a progressively disenfranchised youth and 'politically unaware' subcultures as Thatcherism continued throughout the 1980s and the left became increasingly frustrated.

The CPGB and youth culture before punk

The story of the CPGB's relationship with popular youth culture, set against a backdrop of an explosion in teenage consumption and the identification of particular youth subcultures in the mid-1950s, is one that has been well-detailed by John Callaghan, Geoff Andrews and Mike Waite.[3] I have argued elsewhere that the CPGB's inability to make political inroads with British youth, and the deteriorating relationship between the party and youth culture, even within the YCL, contributed to the party's schism in the 1970s.[4] 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. 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 US armed presence in Britain.[5] The party was particularly concerned about the effect that American culture would have upon British youth and their attitude towards socialism, with Nigel Kelsey writing in the party's weekly journal *World News*: '[t]he 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"'.[6] However, enthusiasm for pop music grew amongst YCL members throughout the mid-to-late 1960s and became a point of contention within the YCL over the next decade – though until the early 1970s the argument seemed to be over whether or not pop musicians could be favourable 'role models' for communist youth. There were some in the YCL (and even the CPGB) who viewed popular youth

culture 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'.[7] Many in the CPGB were wary that any links to popular youth culture would be 'susceptible to tendencies like subjectivism, individualism, leftism, libertarianism and anarchism'.[8]

Looking back on the events of 1968, Jacques and Hall wrote that the radicalisation of the late 1960s 'took a *primarily* cultural rather than political form'.[9] But the CPGB's understanding of culture was fairly limited, and it was not until the early 1970s that the notion of youth culture as instrumental in 'shaping the contours of political debate' was discussed in YCL/CPGB circles.[10] The 'Trends in Youth Culture' debate, which was played out in the pages of *Marxism Today* in 1973 and 1974, was the first real discussion of youth culture as a phenomenon that informed the political outlook of youth, as much as 'race', gender or sexuality (although subsumed by class orientation). Recognition of this phenomenon was important, stated Martin Jacques: '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'.[11] However others, such as CCCS scholars (and future *Marxism Today* contributors) Paul Corrigan and Simon Frith, and YCL National Organiser Bob Lentell, saw this debate as part of a battle simply to persuade CPGB members that 'a genuine youth culture even existed', and as a reaction to the traditional Communist stereotype of youth as 'pop-corrupted' and 'passive consumers'.[12]

The debate continued though the 1970s, with discussion of the role of popular youth culture often intertwined with wider debates over the party's future political direction. At this time, there was an increasing attraction to new ideas for party policy and strategy, and a rise in interest in Gramscism and Eurocommunism. Gramsci's significance in explaining the political importance of social phenomena and categories not usually associated with class politics, such as youth culture, brought into contact the reformers in the CPGB and the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), particularly thinkers such as Stuart Hall, Simon Frith and Dick Hebdige, whose ideas fed off each other during the late 1970s

and into the 1980s. As David Forgacs noted, the trajectories of the CPGB and the CCCS overlapped and became intertwined; the 'Gramscian moment' culminated in the redrafting of the party's manifesto, *The British Road to Socialism*, in 1977, and the publication by the CCCS of *Resistance Through Rituals* and *Policing the Crisis*.[13]

Eric Hobsbawm, in a discussion of Gramsci's political theories in *Marxism Today* in 1977, explained that Gramsci argued that 'societies are more than structures of economic domination and political power' and 'have a certain cohesion even when riven by class struggles'; this was achieved through the processes of hegemony, whereby the ideas of the dominant social group are reinforced through the institutions of civil society.[14] Or, as written in *Resistance through Rituals*: '[h]egemony works through *ideology* … It works *primarily* by inserting the subordinate class into the key institutions and structure which support the power and social authority of the dominant order'.[15] Under the influence of Gramsci, many of the reformers in the CPGB and fellow travellers connected to the CCCS believed that a 'counter-hegemony' needed to be established that could challenge the hegemonic dominance of the establishment, and seek to align different social forces whose identity was not necessarily determined by the capitalist political economy. This was a central point for those working on redrafting the CPGB's programme *The British Road to Socialism*, which got underway in 1976 and was presented in 1977.

One of the key concepts of the new version of *The British Road to Socialism* was the 'broad democratic alliance', which would extend beyond 'an association class forces' to incorporate 'other important forces in society which emerge out of areas of oppression not always directly connected with the relations of production'.[16] The programme argued that capitalism not only exploited people in the workplace: it 'impinges on every aspect of [people's] lives', and this oppression could be the basis of bringing many disparate elements of society together.[17] As Dave Cook wrote in *Marxism Today* in December 1978:

> Workers (and others) are oppressed according to their sex, their colour, the social services they use, their age, as young people, where they live, etc. In reaction to these varied forms of oppression,

movements of struggle have emerged (national, women, black people's etc.). Because of the class structure of our society most people involved in these movements will be from the working class, broadly defined, but it is often their consciousness of oppression, rather than of their class exploitation, which is a key politicising factor.[18]

To bring these movements together, the CPGB put forward the concept of the 'broad democratic alliance', which would, in Gramscian terms, form a counter-hegemonic bloc that could provide an alternative to the present capitalist system. The CPGB, 'as the organised Marxist political party', saw itself (as well as the Labour left) as having a 'special role to play in developing broad left unity', acting as a mediating force between the traditional union movement and other social groups that would help establish the 'broad democratic alliance'.[19]

The opening chapter of *Resistance Through Rituals* argued something similar, that the hegemony of the present capitalist system had thrown up a multitude of opposing social forces, but these were not, at that time, in co-operation with each other. Clarke et al stated that the 'role of hegemony is to ensure that, in the social relations between the classes, each class is continually *reproduced* in its existing dominant-or-subordi-nate form', but it could 'never wholly and absolutely absorb the working-class *into* the dominant order'.[20] This was important, as in the 1970s 'conflict had reappeared on many levels', and the resulting '*crisis* in the hegemony of the ruling class' allowed this multitude to come together to challenge the current order.[21] One of the important ways in which ruling hegemony was expressed and challenged, according to the CCCS, was through youth subculture – these subcultures 'won space' for youth within the dominant system and had potential for political and social mobilisation, but on their own could 'match, meet or answer the structuring dimensions merging … for the class as a whole'. [22] The favourable conditions for youth culture to tap into wider social and polit-ical movements seemed to arise with the emergence of punk, reggae and Rock Against Racism. However the CPGB, like many on the left and in the labour movement, seemed unable to foster closer ties with these emerging youth cultures.

The arrival of punk and Rock Against Racism

The major reforms to the party programme which eventually led to the revised edition of *The British Road to Socialism* in 1977 in some ways fostered a more receptive audience for the political potential of youth culture. However it still took the party a while to look positively towards punk and reggae, and even amongst the reformers emerging around *Marxism Today*, punk (as the archetypal youth culture) was only slowly embraced.

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'.[23] 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'.[24] An anonymous member from London had written in the YCL's paper *Challenge* in June 1976 that '[t]he left ignore popular culture at their peril', but the YCL (and the CPGB) were slow to realise the potential of punk and reggae, as popular youth cultures, to mobilise political activism, particularly activities related to anti-racist/anti-fascist politics.[25]

As Matthew Worley has argued, the CPGB, like many other organisations on the left, had difficulty in understanding punk.[26] Some of the thinking within the party about punk was informed by its previous encounters with the counterculture of the late 1960s. In some ways, Joe Strummer, Johnny Rotten and Pete Shelley (of the Buzzcocks) were manifestations of Bob Dylan, John Lennon and Donovan in a different socio-economic environment. This is evident in Dave Laing's article on punk in *Marxism Today* in early 1978, where he argued that punk had inherited much from the 'rock revolution' of the 1960s, but existed in a more pessimistic time: 'Punk rock represented the first important cultural development in the moment of transition between the period of increasing consumption and one where the expectations of that phase have been frustrated'.[27] For Laing, the themes, the styles and the 'shock

effect' of punk had all come before, but what was different was the relationship between the music and the consumer – the youth of the 1970s could not consume the rebellious nature of rock in the same way that they had done in the 1950s and 1960s, and therefore the punk subculture was consumed and replicated by the explosion of DIY and the notion of 'independence'. However Laing disagreed with the CCCS view of punk, positing that punk was not 'working-class youth … "unconsciously" resisting bourgeois domination', but was a more contradictory phenomenon.[28] In the end, while punk challenged the status quo, it also revealed the limitations of the convergence between the political and cultural struggle. Worley correctly portrays Laing's interpretation as more nuanced than previous arguments of being 'for' or 'against' punk, but this interpretation also allowed for an understanding of punk as a 'youth' thing, and not much more than the latest in a long line of youth trends since the 1950s. A similar distanced view was put forward by Anthony Wall in the CPGB fortnightly journal *Comment* in March 1977: '[s]o far at least, punk rock is not a mass phenomenon – for one thing the fashions that go with it are too bizarre for most young people': but there were also 'shades of the skiffle era', and punk had attracted similar criticism to that levelled at the Rolling Stones and Bob Dylan.[29]

Others in the party, particularly in the YCL, saw punk as a more positive political trend that reflected the situation faced by many youth in Britain in the 1970s. Steve Munby, editor of *Challenge* in 1978, wrote in an article in *Marxism Today* two months after Laing's article appeared: '[p]erhaps punk bands like the Clash have come nearest to capturing a contemporary image … with their emphasis on boredom, frustration, blocked opportunities and wasted creativity'.[30] It is interesting to note that Munby did not mention class here, and described punk as a reflection of youth in general, arguing that (using the examples of RAR and the ANL) the 'sphere of music and culture', rather than explicit class-based politics, 'is of crucial significance in mobilising masses of young people on political issues'.[31] By 1978 *Challenge* was featuring several articles on punk and its relevance to younger people. Graham Kennedy wrote that 1977 had been a watershed moment in popular music, what he called 'our music', where the 'character and rules of rock music … were reformed to admit a new energy, a new rawness, a new honesty'.[32]

'In short', Kennedy proclaimed, 'a significant democratisation of our music took place'.[33] Paul Bradshaw, who had in 1976 complained of the blandness of pop music in the mid-1970s, now in 1977 wrote enthusiastically about the Sex Pistols, the Clash, the Buzzcocks and Subway Sect.[34] Possibly the most explicit support for punk as a political movement came in the form of an open letter in the pages of *Challenge* in mid-1977 to the Sex Pistols. The letter congratulated the Pistols on their 'no compromise' position, but insisted that the band's rebellion needed to go beyond the music industry and connect with 'the kids' where they existed – 'on the streets … in the council estates of the inner city areas and new towns'.[35] The YCL proposed, in what Worley has described as 'an awkward and … rather un-Leninist fashion', that 'we need to get together … bands … fanzines … followers … to fight for our rights. What about it?!!'[36]

But the YCL, like the CPGB, was not a homogenous organisation and some who wrote for *Challenge* were not convinced of punk's political potential. Matthew Lynn, while seeming to be well-versed in punk music, categorically stated that '[p]unk changed nothing in political terms', adding that '[n]either, though, has any youth cult'.[37] Lynn's article takes a very traditional Marxist-Leninist view of the base/super-structure dichotomy, with politics based on issues of economics and class relations, while ideology can only be a reaction to materialist developments. For Lynn, the ideological superstructure cannot affect the machinations occurring in the economic base. He states that 'the fundamental reason why art (Rock 'n' Roll) never can be a political force … [is] because politics is about power and interlocking forces which are quite outside the realm of artistic expression'.[38] His argument against the political usefulness of popular music (and art in general) reflects similar debates occurring in the CPGB over the 1977 revised version of *The British Road to Socialism* and the inclusion of new social movements and identity politics. Expressed in the pages of *Marxism Today* throughout 1978 and 1979, many of the traditionalists in the CPGB were against the idea that 'the personal was political', and felt that identity politics denigrated the role of class politics in the party's outlook. A similar disdain for identity politics can be found in Lynn's article:

> Assuming pop music to be an art form [be it of a perverse kind] –
> some marvellously effective art deals with political subjects, but it
> is not effective politically because it deals with the highly emotive
> personal topics that are the inevitable precursors of politics.[39]

But despite the criticisms made by Lynn and other traditionalists within
the YCL and CPGB, there was an enthusiasm for the cultural exchange
between popular youth culture and progressive politics, as expressed in
The British Road to Socialism and its concept of the 'broad democratic
alliance'. One of the best examples of these two arenas successfully
combining would be Rock Against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League.
There were some CPGB members who admired and supported RAR,
viewing it as a demonstration of the broad democratic alliance – even the
Political Committee described the RAR/ANL Carnival as the 'biggest,
most inspiring and politically important demonstration for some years'–
but this support was different from actual involvement.[40] The reformers
used the Anti-Nazi League and Rock Against Racism as an example of
successful co-operation between the labour movement and the social
movements, which they hoped would 'trigger off … a response from
predominantly working class youth';[41] meanwhile Steve Munby empha-
sised the potential 'strong progressive elements' of the music, declaring
that punk, reggae and new wave were 'of particular *political* impor-
tance'.[42] However the politicisation of British youth through Rock
Against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League did not draw more youthful
support to the YCL or the CPGB.

Youth culture and reforming the CPGB

The reformers within the CPGB, who were beginning to congregate
around the party journal *Marxism Today* under the editorship of Martin
Jacques, saw Rock Against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League as impor-
tant 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 demoralised left.[43] In his defence of the reformed agenda of the CPGB and the 'broad democratic alliance', National Organiser Dave Cook used the example of the Anti-Nazi League several times in an article in *Marxism Today* in late 1978. He used the ANL to show that a political movement could extend beyond the traditional bodies of the labour movement and appeal to the wider public through cultural events. As he wrote: '[i]t was precisely because this was much broader than the labour movement organisations, with a range of cultural sponsorship and involvement (Rock Against Racism, actors, sport, festivals, etc.), that the ANL was able to trigger off such a response from pre-dominantly working class youth.'[44] However, as the debate over the CPGB's official new strategy in the pages of *Marxism Today* shows, there were many within the party who were not convinced of the political importance of youth culture and identity politics, and were appalled by the apparent lack of focus on class-based politics.

The push for reform within the CPGB had, as Geoff Andrews and Mike Waite have shown, emerged through the YCL throughout the early 1970s, who then combined with a younger group of intellectuals in the party, such as those (including Mike Prior, Derek Boothman and Beatrix Campbell) who formed the 'Smith Group', described by Andrew Pearmain as a 'dissident, anti-Stalinist current'.[45] This reforming zeal reached its zenith with the new version of *The British Road to Socialism* and the adoption of the 'broad democratic alliance' strategy, and *Marxism Today*'s role as one of the focal points for the reformers crossed over neatly with the appreciation of popular youth culture as a political motivator for younger people. The 'shock effect' of punk and events like the RAR/ANL Carnivals appealed to some of the reformers and other young party members, particularly as this form of popular youth culture shared some familiar features with the counterculture of the late 1960s, with which they could relate. But, as will be developed later in this article, this 'perfect storm' – the push for reform, the appreciation of youth culture and the phenomenon of punk in the late 1970s, particularly reflected in *Marxism Today* – had the effect of 'essentialising' the party's understanding of the politics of, and trends in, youth culture, and the ways in which left-wing and progressive politics could interact with youth movements in the 1980s.

One of the problems was that, as the younger activists transitioned from the YCL into the CPGB the YCL was unable to replenish its membership, and it was left to older party people to decipher more recent youth culture trends. The fall in YCL membership had started later than the fall in CPGB membership, but had accelerated quickly in the 1970s (membership for the YCL was 1,021 in November 1979) and by the early 1980s, it was on the verge of collapse.[46] Iain Chalmers, the Scottish Secretary of the YCL, surveyed the damage in 1985 in an article titled 'The Future' in the YCL's internal bulletin:

> To examine how bad the problems of the YCL are, we only have to examine the geographical distribution of the YCL in Britain:
>
>> There is no YCL structure in the whole of Wales/Cymru.
>> The structure of the YCL in London has collapsed.
>> Large areas of the country are without the even the remotest contact with the YCL, with little hope for improvement.
>> In areas where there are branches few work in a proper manner, indeed many are only paper branches.
>> Even in areas where membership has held up, such as Scotland, there are still problems of projecting a possitive [sic] perspective.
>
> So in reality, what do we offer young people wanting to join us? [47]

According to Graham Stevenson, by 1987 the YCL 'was now down to 44 members in three branches, having been 40 times that size only ten years [before]'.[48] While the YCL was going into steep decline, *Marxism Today* was growing in stature – it was probably the only successful venture of the CPGB in the 1980s. However the growth of *Marxism Today* and its promotion of alternative ideas to the traditional labourist approach of the CPGB contributed to a growing rift within the party, popularly characterised as a battle between the 'Tankies' or 'Stalinists' and the 'Euros'.[49] While the masthead of *Marxism Today* was still the 'theoretical and discussion journal of the Communist Party of Great Britain', Pearmain has argued that the journal seemed to become a separate entity, where the

ideas that been promoted in the late 1970s were developed and built upon.[50] Within the CPGB, *Marxism Today* now became the place where the politics of youth culture were discussed and contextualised within a wider discussion of building a counter-hegemony to the prevailing political dominance of Thatcherism. Thus the focus of the rest of the article will be on discussions of popular youth culture inside *Marxism Today* throughout the 1980s until its winding up in December 1991.

'Punk is Dead'

By the early 1980s, a new consensus had been formed – punk was dead and apolitical pop music reigned. Punk, reggae, two-tone and post-punk had invigorated youth with messages of political awareness, and the reforming elements within the CPGB had embraced this, but this was now over. For a short period in the late 1970s and early 1980s (circa 1976/77 to 1981/82), the aims of the reformers in the CPGB had occupied similar ground to wider social and cultural movements that mixed politics, music and youth culture, but these relationships had started to fray and move into different directions. However there were several CPGB reformers (and a number of fellow travellers) who held onto 'punk' as a vital subcultural tool for understanding the interaction between progressive politics and youth culture. Throughout the early-to-mid-1980s, there were pages of articles devoted in *Marxism Today* to the political lessons of punk and whether punk was still relevant.

The most eloquent piece in *Marxism Today* on this subject was a 1983 piece by Simon Frith. For Frith, punk 'failed' in two ways. Firstly, he argued, 'the idea of an "alternative" record business turned out to be wishful thinking', and the DIY of punk record labels still relied upon entering the traditional industry and upon the larger record companies for distribution. Secondly, punk (and its post-punk offshoots) did not 'mobilise a political pop audience'.[51] The first point had been made by numerous others, ever since 1977.[52] However some of the punk and post-punk bands interested in the cultural Marxism of Gramsci and the Frankfurt School, such as Gang of Four, the Pop Group and Scritti Politti, would possibly have objected that this had been the purpose of 'punk', and that the purpose of their music was to change attitudes within the

paradigm of traditional pop music.[53] Indeed, this concept in some ways overlapped with the ideas of the broad democratic alliance and 'counter-hegemony' espoused by the reformers in the CPGB and those writing for *Marxism Today*. Both could be seen as part of a 'war of position' within the dominant system, seeking to occupy strategic positions within the present system and using the avenues available from these positions to engage with others and build a counter-hegemony to the status quo.[54]

But this leads to Frith's second criticism. Frith argued that punk and post-punk seemed to many to offer (although Frith also questioned whether this was ever achievable) a promise of action to the concerns of Britain's youth, but in the 1980s, music was 'offered to them, as to the suburban mainstream, simply as a diversion'. Frith mourned:

> Punk was 'dole queue rock' and the 1981 'riots' took place to the soundtrack of the Specials' *Ghost Town*, but since then, while youth's position hasn't changed (except for the worse), pop's response certainly has – the idea is to *dress misery up* [emphasis in original text]. 1982's dole queue hit, Wham's *Wham Rap*, was, for example, a determined dance floor attempt to translate unemployment into leisure.[55]

The pages of *Marxism Today* frequently indulged in this romantic notion of punk as an inspiration for British youth to become activists, usually combined with criticism of punk as eventually 'failing' to mobilise youth into political and social action, and often infused with an awareness of the limitations of the role of popular youth culture in wider politics. In response to Frith's article, Richard Griffin wrote a letter to the journal stating that the interest in politics generated by punk was 'important, as the defeat of the National Front in 1978 showed', but also concluded that the 'decline of punk was inevitable, as with all youth cults'.[56] Another letter in response to Frith took the class reductionist approach – 'I'm not really sure what rock/pop/punk music has got to do with Marxism' – and celebrated the Damned for being 'honest and sincere enough not to pretend that they and modern music in general can – ever -prove to be a revolutionary force for change'.[57]

Several writers were nostalgic for punk and its liberatory rhetoric in

different aspects of life for British youth. In a discussion of fanzines, Paul Mathur wrote:

> Remember that old chestnut The Day Punk Rock Arrived? In a hail of god and a parade of One Chord Wonders, the message that ANYONE can be a star, and without selling one's soul to the big companies.[58]

Caroline Holder argued that punk broke down gender roles in the fashion world:

> Back in 1976, punk freed men to care about the way they looked; to play around and experiment in traditionally female areas. For women it means that they could look aggressive and hostile and feel good. The style of punk broke all previous boundaries of what constituted good taste in dress.[59]

Sue Steward also commented that punk assisted in breaking down gender roles in music, intertwining with the politics of the women's liberation movement:

> 1976 was undoubtedly a turning point – not just through punk's rejection of traditional values and options – but also because of the challenges made by the women's movement on the restrictions upon women. This certainly resulted in an increase of confidence and demystified the instruments and technology of music-making both for women and men.[60]

But Steward also remarked that punk had 'left a wake of confusion and complexity', as sexism in the music industry continued, and, like many of the writers for *Marxism Today*, she questioned whether punk had left a legacy of change to traditional British society.[61] As Frith argued, punk was 'no longer … the sound of left optimism', but this was possibly because too many progressives and leftists had tried to project their politics onto punk: '[t]he tragedy of punk was not that it "failed" to change pop but that so many people … thought it could'.[62]

Beyond post-punk

In many ways 'punk' was essentialised by those at *Marxism Today*, and became a litmus test or blueprint for how to interpret future youth subcultures and their potential political capital, though few would have such explicit political slogans as punk and its various off-shoots. Those who were interested in youth culture had been influenced by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (or the 'Birmingham School'), and punk and reggae fit well into this model, but it seemed to become just an older political demographic treating later youth subcultures as simple repetitions of earlier subcultures. As Steve Redhead wrote, '[m]usic led styles such as heavy metal boys (and girls), goths, new romantics, acid housers or ravers dominated the 80s as cultural critics constantly sought the 'new punk'.'[63]

For some, punk was the end of 'subculture' in any meaningful sense, and the youth culture of the 1980s consisted of either bland commercialism or the revival of previous subcultures. Even before the 1980s arrived, Alan Slingsby, in *Comment*, noted that the punk movement was in decline and that there was a rise in the mod culture of the 1960s. Slingsby adopted a traditional CPGB view of 'present day western youth culture' as a parasitic/vampiric entity (as in Marx's famous description of capitalism[64]) that preyed upon naïve youth:

> The industry that exists like some monstrous parasite upon it is in constant need of new victims. If the analogy isn't too far fetched, once it has sucked the blood of the punks dry it is returning to the body of the mods, thought to be dead but recently showing signs of life.[65]

Richard Griffin's letter to *Marxism Today* had despaired that after the decline of punk, 'nothing [had] taken its place'.[66] And youth culture after punk in the early 1980s (particularly between 1982 and 1985) was viewed as an abyss, with nothing new to say and wallowing in pre-punk nostalgia. Chris Bohn wrote in 1983: '[l]ike never before the pop industry and its service media are openly colluding in the creation of a never-never kiddie world grounded in the spent myths of a swinging

60s'.[67] Even in the late 1980s, some in *Marxism Today* were warning of the return of the hippies, rather than any new subculture. Jane Falkingham and Paul Johnson wrote in 1990: '[a]fter three decades dominated culturally by youth, prepare for the return of the ageing hippy', and predicted that these baby-boomers (hippies-cum-yuppies) would be the 'most powerful consumer group' in the 1990s, as 'there is no large youth group coming from behind to replace them as the driving force of consumerism'.[68] This pessimism surrounding politically moti-vated youth culture mirrored the left's wider concerns about the viability of providing a political alternative to Thatcherism; those centred around *Marxism Today* put forward a particular argument on this, partially based on the Gramscian idea of counter-hegemony and the limits of what Geoff Andrews called traditional 'militant labourism'.[69]

The inner-city riots of 1981, where black and white youth were involved in clashes with the police in Brixton and then across the country in the summer of that year, had at first looked ominous for the still rela-tively new Conservative government, and many on the left, including the CPGB, had seen these riots as actions of a rebellious youth who were frustrated with the status quo, but unable to foster connections with any viable political vehicle.[70] (As an internal CPGB document stated, the inner-city communities were involved in a struggle: 'Anarchically – yes. Negatively – yes. Individualistically – yes. But nonetheless in struggle'.[71]) But despite the hopes of the left, the events of the summer of 1981 did not lead to wider resistance to the Thatcherite government, and between 1982 and 1987, Thatcher's triumvirate of victories – against the Argentineans in the Falklands, against the trade unions in the 1984-85 Miners' Strike and against the Labour Party in the 1983 and 1987 general elections – impressed upon many that there had been a hege-monic shift to the right and the neo-liberal ideals of Thatcherism.

Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques had long been interested in explaining the appeal of Thatcherism and how the Conservatives had been able to ideologically situate themselves as the dominant political force in 1980s Britain. Hall had described the politics of Thatcherism as more than simply 'the corresponding political bedfellow of a period of capitalist recession';[72] it was the result of a longer ideological shift away from the parameters of the post-war social democratic consensus. Thatcherism

encompassed many themes of the right – 'law and order, the need for social discipline and authority in the face of a conspiracy by the enemies of the State, the onset of social anarchy, the "enemy within", the dilution of British stock by alien black elements'– but found a greater reception for the repressive measures needed to deal with these concerns in the economic crisis of the late 1970s.[73] This is what Jacques described as 'the underlying crisis of hegemony' (i.e. the social-democratic hegemony of the postwar period), in which Thatcher asserted a 'popular *and* authoritarian rightism' as the solution to 'a more divided and polarised society'.[74] By 1987, Hall was arguing that, in the wake of her third general election victory, Thatcher had reshaped the British political landscape, and this was as much based on 'material interests' as it was 'ideologically defined':

> The whole point of Thatcherism as a form of politics has been to construct a new social bloc, and in this project ideology is critical.[75]

The electoral successes of Thatcherism indicated that the sections of British society who had traditionally supported Labour (and whom the CPGB had traditionally attempted to draw towards a Communist-Labour position) were much more fragmented and seen to be more ideologically driven. As Hall wrote, material/class interests had some influence, '[b]ut they are not escalators which automatically deliver people to their appointed destinations, "in place", within the political-ideological spectrum'.[76] People were likely to be guided in their actions by notions of class, but they also guided by notions of ethnicity, sexuality, gender, or any other form of identity politics, including youth subculture. Although the 'broad democratic alliance' of *The British Road to Socialism* embraced this argument, the fact was that the CPGB seemed to offer little to these different social movements and social forces. And in the early-to-mid-1980s a series of expulsions, resignations and factions formed within the party, which experienced a sharp decline in membership and the breakaway of its former daily newspaper, the *Morning Star*.[77] The demise of the CPGB can be measured by the fact that in 1981 it had 18,458 members, but by 1985 this had dropped to 12,711; and then in 1989, when the Berlin Wall collapsed, membership had dwindled to 7,615.[78]

However these numbers still hide the distinction between 'active' and 'non-active' members; a substantial number in the party were believed to be members on paper only, and many activists who were still CPGB members were involved in working in progressive political and social movements outside the influence of the party.[79] As Beatrix Campbell complained in *Marxism Today*, '[m]any communist activists put their renewable energy elsewhere, outside the party, in the informal world of civil society, the practical pains and pleasures of politics that can make a difference'.[80] So even when the conditions for political mobilisation against Thatcherism grew in the mid-to-late 1980s, particularly with the movement against the Poll Tax, the CPGB was unable to make any kind of purposeful intervention.

Red Wedge, Live Aid and the Mandela concert

By the mid-1980s there was cultural groundswell against Thatcherism in Britain, and more broadly against a range of international injustices, such as Apartheid in South Africa and poverty in Africa. In Britain, the cultural revolt against Thatcherism first took form in events in support of the striking miners, and then in the establishment of Red Wedge, while the cultural actions taken up for international causes included Artists Against Apartheid and Live Aid. Stan Rijven wrote in 1988: '[t]he mid-80s has seen a shift in consciousness among rock artists towards social and political issues'.[81] But those writing for *Marxism Today* often interpreted these musical/cultural events through the prism of previous youth cultures, such as the counterculture of the late 1960s and '1968', or punk and the 'success' of Rock Against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League. Writing in the wake of Live Aid, Hall and Jacques wrote that the 'link between rock culture and politics is not, of course, new – it was powerful element in the politics of the 1960s, and Rock against Racism'.[82] Playwright David Edgar celebrated Live Aid for 'gash[ing] a great gaping hole in the contemporary conservative portrait of the modern malaise', and seeking 'culturally to mobilise billions of people, all across the northern hemisphere, on behalf of the tens of billions of the south'.[83] Emphasising the power of culture (particularly the youth culture of the 1960s) to mobilise people, Edgar drew parallels between

Live Aid's cultural mobilisation and previous interactions between youth culture and politics:

> it's perhaps not completely coincidental that it's been those move-ments – rather than more conventional industrial mobilisations – which have shown the greatest imagination in their use of form from the poster and badge art of the antiwar movement and the Anti-Nazi League, to the powerful theatrical symbolism of the practice of the new peace campaigners.

In response to Edgar, Simon Frith lambasted him for describing Live Aid as 'a reassertion of 60s ideology', arguing that the 'political use of music' emerged 'more obviously from the 70s and Rock Against Racism than the 60s', and it was this idealism that Live Aid tapped into.[84] Stan Rijven argued that these cultural appeals supporting political and social causes had developed through anti-Apartheid activities that used music to high-light the situation in South Africa, with Special AKA's 'Nelson Mandela' sparking this off. The title of Rijven's article, 'Rocking the Racists', shows awareness that even this links back to Rock Against Racism, with the Specials and Elvis Costello (who produced the 'Nelson Mandela' single) both having played at RAR Carnivals in the late 1970s and early 1980s.[85] Mark Perryman wrote something similar in 1988 about the anti-apartheid movement (or the Mandela campaign) in Britain, proclaiming that it worked 'because of the mix of the old with the new, the traditional forms of political campaigning with the worlds of entertainment and communications'; the campaign was 'rooted in a heritage of popular music with a political conscience', such as the 'soul music of the civil rights movement of 60s America; the peace, love and understanding of the late 60s; the punk agitation of Rock Against Racism'.[86]

For those writing in *Marxism Today*, Live Aid and the anti-apartheid concerts were reactions against the economic neo-liberalism of Thatcherism/Reaganism, what Hall and Jacques described as 'the triumph of an ideology of selfishness and scapegoats'.[87] But, as David Edgar noted, these events also 'gave a number of fabulously rich people the opportunity … to parade their compassion in front of one of the largest television audiences in history'.[88] The experience of Rock Against Racism and the

Anti-Nazi League highlighted, for the writers of *Marxism Today*, that the organisers of Live Aid and Artists Against Apartheid (and so on) had learnt that music and popular culture could be used to spread awareness of political or social issues, but what had made the campaigns of the 1970s sustainable and more successful had been the traditional local-level activities. Dick Hebdige described RAR as maintaining 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"', alongside its use of musical events to engage in anti-racist politics.[89] This was also required to sustain the momentum of the outpouring of charity after Live Aid and the enthusiasm for the anti-apartheid movement in Britain. For example, alongside the music, Mark Perryman wrote, 'Mandela's freedom demands an ongoing campaign and it will have to be one in which this present spectacular moment can lay a basis for many more fusions of the political and cultural'.[90] Music and popular culture had pricked the imaginations of people, but this cultural and popular appeal needed to be transformed into tangible political actions.

This matter of the relationship between pop and politics, and the legacy of punk and Rock Against Racism as a framework, was most evident in the discussion of Red Wedge by those centred around *Marxism Today*. Red Wedge was a cultural campaign, primarily led by musicians, such as Billy Bragg, Paul Weller and Jimmy Sommerville, but also extending to comedy, comics and magazines, which was established with the purpose of generating support amongst younger voters for the Labour Party in the lead up to the 1987 General Election. Red Wedge consciously built its campaign around the model established by Rock Against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League, but many on the left, including those at *Marxism Today*, had concerns about taking a previous framework, which was very much based on local grassroots activity, to create a platform for a mainstream political party. Simon Frith and John Street explored the differences between RAR and Red Wedge in a 1986 article for *Marxism Today*, which drew a distinction between RAR, which was a single issue campaign against racism, and more specifically the fascism of the National Front, and Red Wedge, which linked concern about various political and social issues into an electoral strategy for the

Labour Party, trying to make ties with Labour's political programme.[91] As Frith and Street point out, '[t]he point of RAR … was not to change a party but to destroy one'.[92] Part of the success of RAR and the ANL was their reliance upon local branches to take the initiative under the broad direction of the RAR constitution and RAR Central and/or the ANL National Steering Committee, but there was not much of a push for RAR/ANL supporters to adhere to a party line (although much of the initiative behind both campaigns came from the SWP).

However, as Frith and Street argued, Red Wedge was much more 'highly centralised' by the Labour Party and was 'constructed around the *electoral* needs of the party', rather than addressing any particular political or social concerns that British youth might have.[93] There were several constituencies that the Labour Party needed to appeal to among younger Britons ('youth, women, CND, anti-apartheid, gays, blacks, animal rights, etc'), and Red Wedge tried to bring them together under the banner of Labour, with different musicians associated with different causes – 'The Communards representing gays, Junior Giscombe and Lorna Gee young blacks etc'.[94] On the other hand, Mark Perryman, in a laudatory article on Paul Weller (from The Jam/Style Council), seemed to propose that support for Labour, through Red Wedge and the 'Jobs and Industry' campaign, where Weller toured with fellow Red Wedger Billy Bragg, was more politically sound than supporting single-issue campaigns. Perryman complained that '[m]ost of Weller's pop allies remain committed on a single-issue basis which is certainly worthy but full of unhappy complexities', citing 'the ideological somersaults performed when Wham! turned out for the miners'.[95]

The question seemed to be the nature of the long-term purpose of Red Wedge. Frith and Street asked rhetorically whether 'Red Wedge is politicising youth' or 'providing anything more than the soundtrack to an advertising campaign'.[96] However in the obituary for Red Wedge in *Marxism Today* in January 1988, Red Wedge became more romanticised, with John Street now proclaiming:

> Red Wedge's own ambitions were less tied to Labour's electoral performance. It wanted to make young people 'realise that politics is a part of everyday life'.

> Getting them to vote was only the start. Their goals also meant changing the party, rather than being used by it.[97]

But, as Street noted, this strategy had not succeeded, whether gauged by the electoral results of the 1987 election (where young votes for Labour (18-22) went up to 34 per cent, but were still 11% behind the Conservatives), or by the inclusion of youth issues into the Labour Party programme. Labour had shifted away from trying to attract the youth vote and had 'gone off in search of the illusive yuppie'.[98] Unlike RAR (which died out for different reasons), Red Wedge didn't have the local support to maintain itself once the election was over.

The 'shock' of the new

While large scale cultural events (such as the RAR/ANL Carnivals) were seen as potentially useful tools for mobilising people into progressive political action, those writing in *Marxism Today*, predominantly informed by the CCCS interpretation of subculture, also saw the political importance in the 'everyday-ness' of subcultural identities. Punk served as the archetypal politically informed subculture, and future subcultures were compared with this essentialised notion of punk. Some of the subcultures that emerged in the 1980s were easily categorised into the framework created by punk – music of the frustrated/bored (working class) youth, with little hope in Thatcherite Britain (or, as many subcultures were transported from the United States, in Reaganite America). This can be seen in the various subcultures that resonated within Britain's black communities, particularly rap, hip hop, breakdancing and later, ragamuffin, and how they were discussed in *Marxism Today*. A 1984 article by Chris Savage-King reported on 'street dancing', portraying breakdancing and bodypopping as a form of resistance that had developed since the days of the slave trade in Brazil, but now reflected the culture of 'urban black youths who have taught themselves'.[99] Savage-King argued that commercialism had crept into street dancing in Britain, and it seemed 'a long way from cultural resistance and self-defence', but it was, at the same time, a physical and aesthetic display of black culture. As she stated, 'street dancing has been the means of establishing an active

and impressive black presence on our streets: the form remains a dazzling and powerful assertion of a "minority" culture'.[100]

In 1990, Rick Glanvill wrote of rap and hip hop subculture in similar celebratory and politicised terms as those used by writers before him about punk:

> Hip hop and rap music, sounds that came screaming (as punk had before them) from the mouths of disenchanted youths, set a radical new agenda for pop music in the early part of the decade, based on the cheapness of new music technology for bedroom experiment.[101]

But in 1987-88, *Marxism Today* was much more wary about rap and hip hop. Stuart Cosgrove portrayed the rap of Public Enemy, LL Cool J and Run DMC as 'unsocial', repeating almost verbatim 'the popular equation linking rap music with violence', and came to the conclusion that these rap acts were 'the best scam since punk'.[102] Particularly nasty criticism was expressed towards the Beastie Boys for being 'rich, middle class and arrogant and … earning a fortune on a minimal amount of talent', and Cosgrove equated them with 'the year's other moral panic, the yuppie'. While this level of criticism was only directed towards the Beastie Boys, possibly seen as an 'inauthentic' rap act in 1987, the article (one of the most substantial articles on rap and hip hop in *Marxism Today*) has a general tone of dismissal regarding one of the most important subcultures of the late twentieth century. This could be construed as the inability of those writing for *Marxism Today* to fully comprehend youth subcultures in the 1980s, just as previous CPGB journals had conveyed an apprehensive tone towards past subcultures.

Although there was an initial ambivalence towards rap and hip hop, *Marxism Today* finally did recognise other subcultures that reflected the mood of black youth, such as ragamuffin. Like reggae, ska and Rastafarianism, ragamuffin had been transported from Jamaica to Britain and was seen in *Marxism Today* as a 'new youth protest movement of the disaffected black underclass'.[103] Combining the music and aesthetics of reggae and rap, ragamuffin fed off previous subcultures, displaying the hybrid identities forming in postcolonial black Britain and, according to

Kwesi Owusu, they 'symbolise[d] a change in the cultural climate of the city, in the context of growing social and economic problems'.[104] This was written at a time seemingly heading towards political protest – the riots of Broadwater Farm and Handsworth were recent, and, in the face of a mounting recession, there was also emerging resistance to the forthcoming Poll Tax in England and Wales. From this vantage point, rap, hip hop and ragamuffin looked likely to be the soundtrack to any potential disturbances within Britain's black communities, just as reggae and ska had been during the inner-city riots that swept across Britain in the summer of 1981.

In some ways, parallels could be easily drawn between the subcultures of punk and rap/hip hop, as subcultures of youth rebellion in a degenerative urban environment, and these were made by many other commentators and scholars as well as in *Marxism Today*, but the writers at the journal were more uncertain regarding other forms of youth culture that didn't seem to fit neatly into the framework offered by past 'political' subcultures. As David Hesmondhalgh wrote about the left and dance music culture, '[j]ournals such as *Marxism Today* and *New Society* provided extensive and positive coverage of punk. But there was no such acclaim for disco'.[105] The most significant example of this was the rise of acid house and rave culture in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Acid house appeared in the late 1980s as a subculture in Britain, built upon the house music and club aesthetics of Detroit and New York, transplanted to clubs like the Hacienda in Manchester and Heaven, The Trip and Shroom in London.[106] It has often been characterised as an escape from the bleak political landscape of the Thatcher era, rather than as a subcultural challenge to it, like punk, ska or rap. Andrew Hill has argued that acid house did not easily fit into the class-based framework of subculture put forward by the CCCS in *Resistance through Rituals*, but echoed Stanley Cohen's earlier work on the Mods and Rockers in *Folk Devils & Moral Panics*, as acid house encapsulated 'an identifiable set of practices participated in by youths, that were labelled and reacted to as deviant'.[107]

Because of strict licensing laws in Britain, the clubs where acid house culture was being developed had to close at 2am, and this led to the establishment of raves in open areas that had no time limits, and on the fringes of legality. As the government became more concerned about acid

house and rave culture in the 1990s, because of its drug use (particularly ecstasy) and its use of open-air environments for raves, it tried to introduce legislation under the Entertainments (Increased Penalties) Act and Criminal Justice Act to curb these activities. And it was only when faced with the challenge of the Criminal Justice Act that rave culture (the 'acid' sound had been replaced with harder forms of dance music) really became politicised.[108]

Various commentators inside *Marxism Today* saw acid house as resulting from Thatcherism's emphasis on consumerism and individualism, and as an escapist reaction to it. This confusion may in some small way reflect the North-South divide, which had widened under Thatcher. In London, the acid house scene may have been 'the next big thing' for the consumerist 'yuppie' – according to Geoff Mulgan 'the 1990s equivalent of the dropout works in the City during the week and goes to Acid House parties at the weekend'.[109] But acid house also boomed in the North, in cities like Manchester, Sheffield and Liverpool, where the economic benefits of Thatcherism had been less apparent, and it was more seen as an escape from the dire economic situation. However, unlike previous subcultures, acid house was not characterised as resistance to the current socio-economic and political situation. As Martin King wrote, 'the Acid House phenomenon is hardly a culture of resistance to capitalism (indeed it is part of the most rapidly expanding sector)'.[110]

For Dick Hebdige, the original author of the book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, acid house was a celebration of freedom allowed by consumerism and disposable incomes. Acid house was 'to do with pleasure, leisure, the right to dance not work'; but he noted that 'work remains significant insofar as the people who take part need money to spend on tickets, refreshment, petrol, phonecalls'.[111] Hebdige contrasted this with the Miners' Strike of 1984-85, saying that one was about the right to 'join a picket line', while the other was about the right 'to empty your pocket having a good time'.[112] But at the same time, he claimed that both were about '*the right to community* and free association, the right of people to congregate *en masse* and to act in concert to achieve a common purpose', which was particularly prescient as acid house gatherings were increasing in size and frequency, 'at a time when mass political move-

ments in the West are in decline'.[113] Peter Davies linked acid house parties both to New Age religion and to Trotskyist groups such as the SWP and the RCP; they could be viewed as 'ambiguous expressions of civil society, a form of alternative "people power"' that may 'constitute a decentred dissident movement'.[114] But Paolo Hewitt warned that while those attending acid house parties 'may strongly resent Margaret Thatcher's interference as the police break up their clubs and the Bright bill severely limits their right to party', many of these clubbers were 'fiercely apolitical', and there was 'little evidence of them placing their faith in the Left'.[115]

Lessons for the left?

David Hesmondhalgh wrote that the 'left in Britain has had a much more distant relationship with dance music culture', as opposed to punk, and found this ironic, given that it:

> was the central strand in contemporary subcultural music during a period when the left was congratulating itself, in the pages of *Marxism Today* and *New Socialist*, on having developed a new sensitivity to popular culture.[116]

But as this article has shown, *Marxism Today*'s interpretation of popular youth culture was not as sensitive towards developing subcultures as it was towards established and past subcultures. Nevertheless, one of the arguments that was continually raised in the pages of *Marxism Today* was an appeal to the rest of the British left to take popular youth culture seriously. In the wake of Live Aid and other similar campaigns, Hall and Jacques criticised the left for its 'grudging support' and 'good supply of sectarian sniping', arguing that if the left was to be of political importance, it needed to 'relate positively to others' (such as those involved in these mainstream cultural events) and not 'isolate itself from the mainstream of national-popular life'.[117] This was part of a wider argument put forward by *Marxism Today* , pioneered by Hall and Jacques, that the 'cultural face of Britain' had changed irreversibly throughout the postwar period and that the left had difficulty in 'keeping pace with the

enormous cultural changes which have occurred since the 1950s'.[118] One of the key ideas promoted by *Marxism Today* was that the left had to understand the political importance of culture and style. As Rosemary Betterton wrote in October 1985:

> The Left has had a powerful tradition of socialist iconography, but one which, with its stress on heroic white male working class values, is no longer current today. This is not simply a question of updating old styles, but a need for the language and imagery of socialism to communicate with the knowledge, the hope and the desires of people in the present.[119]

For Betterton, the left needed to be 'aware of popular cultural forms in music or fashion', as well as using new media technologies (such as video and cable TV) and the symbols and images that emerged from new social movements, such as the protests at Greenham Common.[120]

On the issue of popular music and youth culture, one of the complaints regularly aired in *Marxism Today* was that the traditional 'style' and outlook of the left meant that 'the Left [had] little or no knowledge of popular music and popular culture'.[121] Andrew Goodwin wrote in 1985 (after the Miners' Strike benefit concerts and Live Aid) that the 'left music' (or political pop music) favoured by the CPGB, the left and the labour movement seemed 'to delight in a kind of dull worthiness that has so little popular appeal'.[122] Goodwin noted that '[s]ocialist responses to pop haven't generally been noted for their deep appreciation of the form', and argued that many on the left had only promoted music that followed the 'correct' line.[123] Simon Frith also argued in 1983 that the left was overly concerned with music that was politically 'correct' – 'either as *agit-pop* – do things to people, instruct them – or as *folk-pop*, the direct account of collective experience'.[124] Jeremy Gilbert, in a letter to *Marxism Today* in 1991, claimed that youth culture in the post-punk era (not the post-punk subculture particularly) had little time for these constraints and the concern with adhering the 'correct' line: '[t]he authoritarianism of a party will never find support among those young people, whose culture is so distinctively post-punk'.[125] Gilbert implored the CPGB to take the opportunity to take notice of the concerns of the

youth of the 1990s, stating 'there is a desperate need for a formation which can unite those attracted to post-punk anarchism, those desperate for any kind of reform, and those engaged in all the various fields of opposition amongst my generation'.[126] However the party did not seize this opportunity, and collapsed six months later.

Despite the debate on popular youth culture and its promotion as an avenue for political and social mobilisation and awareness raising by those connected to *Marxism Today*, the reality is that these discussions had little effect as the party spiralled towards non-existence in the late 1980s; and it only formed a small part of the 'New Times' thinking that directed the party programme in its final years. In the aftermath of Thatcher's third electoral victory in 1987, those party members centred around the journal were instrumental in the CPGB deciding to review *The British Road to Socialism* programme, which had last been revised in 1977. This eventually led to the publishing of the *Manifesto for New Times*, kicked off by a discussion in *Marxism Today* in October 1988 and adopted by the CPGB at its penultimate congress in late 1989. In the initial discussion article published in the journal in October 1988, the document only mentioned popular youth culture in an oblique fashion, referring to Live Aid and the Mandela concert from the same year as examples that 'showed that hundreds of thousands of people could be mobilised around political events, which were implicitly anti-Thatcherite', and arguing that the culture of the labour movement needed to change to relate to many other social movements that 'go unrepresented in formal politics'.[127] The final version of the *Manifesto for New Times* made no mention of cultural events or phenomena as sites of potential political mobilisation.

The political embrace of popular culture did not arrest the decline of the CPGB, but around the time that the party dissolved itself in late 1991, other traditional organs of the British labour movement, particularly the Labour Party, were starting to take a keen interest in using popular youth culture to 'interact' with those who had become disenfranchised during the long years of Thatcherism. As Lisa Hill and Jonathan Louth have shown, the turnout for voters aged 18 to 24 dropped by over 10 per cent between 1983 and 1997;[128] and, as Kenneth Roberts argued, a large number of those youth who became disenfran-

chised and angry with the political system did not join political or social organisation, but instead turned to expressing their discontent on the streets.[129] In her study of Neil Kinnock's turn towards popular culture in the mid-1980s, Lucy Robinson has pointed out that Labour believed that popular culture was the vehicle to re-engage with Britain's youth.[130] The cultural politics espoused by *Marxism Today* and Labour's quest to seek 'to appeal new audiences without alienating the old ones' through pop culture had a moment of crossover with Tony Blair and New Labour's promotion of 'Cool Britannia';[131] but, as Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques protested, this was not the intention of the push for reform within the CPGB or the 'modernising' programme of the party's theoretical journal.[132] Andrew Pearmain cites three people involved in reforming the CPGB and linked to *Marxism Today* (Mike Prior, David Purdy and Pat Devine) to conclude that, for all of the discussion of reform and change in the journal-cum-magazine, its practical impact at the time was limited, particularly on the CPGB, the left and the social movements it hoped to interact with. Pearmain quotes Purdy as saying that the journal created 'vigorous debate amongst intellectuals about various ideas that didn't have much purchase on policy or social move-ments'.[133]

Conclusion

In 1985, Phil Cohen wrote that the British left's view of youth and youth culture was driven by nostalgia and historicism, stating that 'they seize on specific practices which characterise a minority of young people, misread their meaning by looking at them through historical spectacles and end up with global prescriptions which have no purchase on the real situa-tion'.[134] The manner in which members of the CPGB responded to the politics of youth and relevance of popular youth culture was very much informed by history and the memory of past youth cultures. The history of the relationship between the CPGB and youth culture was one of slowly decreasing mutual caution, from the outright hostility directed towards rock 'n' roll to the more muted acceptance of the importance of the counterculture in the cultural and political radicalism of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The perception of youth culture as a significant

factor for mobilising people into social and political activities became more widely accepted within the CPGB at the same time that a younger generation of CPGB/YCL members pushed for reforms to the party programme that would widen the scope of struggle for the party and potentially allow it to more freely interact with other social groups and forces. In the realm of popular youth culture, the arrival of punk and what Mark Perryman referred to as 'its political masterpiece', Rock Against Racism, helped to prove for the party reformers the potential political importance that culture could have in bringing different sections of British society together towards common progressive goals and helping to mobilise those on the fringes of the political landscape, especially younger people.[135] However while this push for widening the political struggle under the banner of the 'broad democratic alliance' coincided with an enthusiasm for politically informed popular culture in the late 1970s and continued through to the early 1980s, the overlap between the two concepts became more frayed as the 1980s progressed. Although popular youth culture was routinely featured in *Marxism Today* as the flagship for debate over leftist politics, youth culture in the 1980s (beyond the offshoots of post-punk) was interpreted through the 'palimpsestic narrative' of the subcultural interpretation of punk as the cultural expression of the politics of working-class youth.[136] As this article has shown, the political impact of punk and campaigns like RAR cast a long a shadow over how the reformer wing of the CPGB deciphered later youth culture, that did not seem to convey the same level of explicit political consciousness as previous subcultures. In the end, the featuring of popular youth culture in *Marxism Today* contributed little to the pragmatic problem of re-connecting British youth with left-wing politics, or to helping to revive the misfortunes of the Young Communist League and the CPGB, which had sustained high losses amongst its younger membership.

Notes

1. Eric Hobsbawm, 'Observations on the debate', in Martin Jacques & Francis Mulhern, *The Forward March of Labour Halted?*, London: Verso, 1981, p181.

2. Mark Perryman, 'Beyond Lennonism', *Marxism Today*, October 1985, p41.

3. John Callaghan, *Cold War, Crisis and Conflict: The CPGB 1951-68*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2003; Geoff Andrews, *Endgames and New Times: The final years of British communism 1964-1991*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2004, pp32-38; Mike Waite, 'Sex n drugs n rock n roll (and communism) in the 1960s', in Geoff Andrews, Nina Fishman and Kevin Morgan (eds), *Opening the Books: Essays on the social and cultural history of the British Communist Party*, London: Pluto Press, 1995, pp213-216.

4. Evan Smith, 'Are the Kids United? The Communist Party of Great Britain, Rock Against Racism and the politics of youth culture', *Journal for the Study of Radicalism*, 5/2, 2011, pp84-117.

5. Callaghan, *Cold War, Crisis and Conflict*, pp86-87.

6. Nigel Kelsey, 'Post-war youth and politics', *World News*, 21 July 1956, p460.

7. Waite, 'Sex n drugs n rock n roll …', p213.

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