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Introduction

Youth Culture, Popular Music and the End of 'Consensus' in Post-War Britain

Jon Garland, Keith Gildart, Anna Gough-Yates, Paul Hodkinson, Bill Osgerby, Lucy Robinson, John Street, Pete Webb & Matthew Worley

Modern British historians have rarely shown much interest in questions of youth, youth culture or popular music.[1] Though it would be over-stating matters to suggest that young people have been written out of the British past, they have rarely formed the primary focus of historical study. While a concentration on youth has sometimes been used to explore wider cultural or historical issues, particularly with regard to work, social welfare, family and education,[2] the politics and cultural pursuits of youth have more typically been left to writers from other academic disciplines to explain or assess: to sociologists, political scientists, criminologists and cultural studies. The time has surely come, therefore, for historians to take youth seriously; to seek to contextualise and understand the ways in which young people have navigated their way to adulthood through the dramatically changing socio-economic and political contours of the twentieth century. Indeed, we would go so far as to argue that the study of youth and youth culture provides an opportunity to uncover important aspects of social and political change, be they mediated through consumption, the construction of identity, the production of popular music, or in terms of providing a 'space' beyond the family, school and workplace in which formative cultural and political interests and perspectives are developed.

The concepts of youth and youth culture are themselves relatively modern. As John Gilles, Michael Mitterauer and, more recently, Jon Savage have shown, the notion of youth as a distinct social category only began to take shape in the later nineteenth century, born primarily out of concern towards matters of delinquency and social reform.[3] Thereafter, youth—as a concept and a physical presence within society—began

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to take on a symbolic significance that resonated throughout the twentieth (and in the twenty-first) century. Youth was not only recognised—albeit rather amorphously—as an intermediate stage between childhood and adulthood, but also served as a metaphorical device to embody both the aspirations and anxieties of a particular historical time. Youth could be a harbinger of change, an emergent consumer, a signifier of hope, or a portent of social decline. In other words, youth was a social construct shaped in accordance with a variety of socio-economic, cultural and political determinants; its meaning—and its relationship to wider society—could vary according to the context.

As for youth culture, the concept was first taken up by sociologists in the USA, again in relation to the problems of delinquency.[4] In the wake of the Second World War, sociologists in both the USA and the UK turned their attention towards the evermore distinctive and visible cultural forms forged—or adopted—by young people in a period of expanding media, increased earnings and extended cultural and educational provision.[5] Most famously, perhaps, the Birmingham University Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) was founded by Richard Hoggart in 1964, giving rise to a series of pioneering papers, books and articles that suggested aspects of youth culture could be read as sites of 'symbolic resistance' to prevailing socio-economic and cultural relations within society.[6] Since then, social science research on youth culture has blossomed, with an array of theories and methodologies competing to explain such matters as the experience of youth and identity and the construction of delinquency.[7] But while the concepts of youth and youth culture may still be relatively new, they are no longer so novel as to deny historical investigation. Indeed, the emergence of youth cultural categories has tended to be equated with the historical conditions forged in the wake of the Second World War. In particular, the notion of the teenager-as-consumer has raised questions of both adaptation and resistance to shifts in wider social, economic, cultural and political change.[8] We would suggest, therefore, that the time is right to place the experiences and cultural forms associated with youth under the historical microscope; to complement ongoing social science research into youth culture with empirical, historical analysis and to open up a cross-disciplinary dialogue to stimulate and provoke interest into the ways by which youth culture fits into our understanding of contemporary history. Just as the CCCS' interest in youth culture developed in a period of dramatic socio-economic and political change, so ours is very much informed by the current climate in which rising youth unemployment, student protest, issues of delinquency, political (dis)engagement, and questions of social mobility have once more come to the fore. By revisiting and re-contextualising the history of youth culture and its relationship to particular cultural forms such as popular music and popular literature, we suggest it is possible to reclaim, or at least re-evaluate, its political potential.

For this reason, the Interdisciplinary Network for the Study of Subcultures, Popular Music and Social Change was established in 2010. By drawing from across academic disciplines—criminology, history, media studies, politics and sociology—the Network has dedicated itself to explore the ways in which aspects of youth culture and popular music serve as mediums for social change. To this end, an inaugural conference was held at London Metropolitan University in September 2011, with various workshops

and symposiums planned thereafter. In more general terms, the Network's basic premise may be defined thus: that aspects of youth culture, including popular music, literature and film, are both a product of and a response to prevailing social, economic, cultural and political forces; that youth culture and popular music help inform and redefine the construction of class, gender, national and other personal identities; that youth culture and popular music provide a potential forum for dissent or expression denied those outside or alienated from the existing political or socio-cultural mainstream. To study the history of youth culture and popular music is, we suggest, to study not only an important and formative stage in the life of an individual, but also the origins and facilitation of much subsequent social, political and cultural change.

Youth Culture, Popular Music and Social Change

This issue of *Contemporary British History* arose from a symposium devoted to examining youth-associated cultural responses to the political, economic and socio-cultural changes that transformed Britain in the aftermath of the Second World War. This, in turn, revealed the extent to which elements of youth culture and popular music served to contest the notion of 'consensus' that Dennis Kavanagh, Peter Morris, Anthony Seldon and others have suggested served to frame the British polity from the late 1940s to the 1970s.[9] Not only did youth culture appear to reveal notable fault-lines in and across British society, but it also provided alternative perspectives and reactions to the presumptions of mainstream political and cultural opinion in the period leading up to and after the seemingly pivotal moment of Margaret Thatcher's election to prime minister in 1979.

Politically, 'consensus' has tended to denote the commitment of both Labour and Conservative governments to such notions as a mixed economy, full employment and a comprehensive welfare state. These, in turn, were seemingly discarded in the wake of Margaret Thatcher's election to prime minister in 1979, from when Keynesian economics were replaced by monetarism; the collectivist, egalitarian values of the post-1945 period were swapped for those of individualism; and government by co-operation, particularly with the trade unions, was rejected for government by conviction. The lady was not for turning, and Britain's political and socio-economic landscape was to be wholly reshaped as a consequence.

Such a thesis is contentious.[10] As critics of 'consensus' make clear, ideological differences remained at the centre of British politics even if certain assumptions were shared as to the governance of post-war Britain. Also, it has been argued that the period was more of 'political settlement' than 'consensus'—meaning both Labour and the Conservatives were compromising rather than consensual in the respective politics—and that any real commitment to consensus ended long before the late 1970s. Beneath the veneer of a country steadily—and stoically—rebuilding itself in the aftermath of the Second World War, residual class, gender and racial differences also remained as sites of conflict and struggle. Without wishing to delve too deeply into what is an ongoing debate, therefore, the articles here work from the premise that the

concept of a political consensus may be applied as a descriptive term of reference for Britain's development in the 1960s, but recognise too both the limits and the fault-lines that cut across the prevailing status quo long before Margaret Thatcher reset the coordinates of Britain's socio-economic and political trajectory from 1979.

Certainly, many of the scholars associated with the CCCS accepted the notion of a perceived consensus in British politics and society during the 1950s and early 1960s.[11] This, they argued, was a product of improved living standards (especially working-class consumer spending) that seemingly smoothed socio-economic divisions towards a classless and more affluent society. At the same time, the CCCS recognised the fragility—or the 'myth'—upon which such a concept was based. It was, ultimately, a construct that was politically expedient but inherently unstable at both an ideological and socio-economic level. As a result, the hegemonic conception of a growing consensus soon came under threat once the optimism of the early 1960s began to transform into the apocalyptic visions of 'crisis' and national collapse that bedevilled the media and political-psyche of the 1970s.[12] Alongside the onset of inflation, rising unemployment and industrial strife, the socio-cultural changes engendered by the advent of consumer society and growing social equality were met by a hardening conservative resolve. With television, sexual emancipation and social mobility came mounting concern as to the loss of Britain's moral compass. And as the empire began to fade into the past, so the nation's point and purpose became a matter of deep anxiety.

Amidst all this, the interconnection between youth, youth culture and the processes of social change brought much media and political attention.[13] For the CCCS, youth and the young consumer had emerged as totems of positive social change in the immediate period of post-war reconstruction. Once 'crisis' beset the 'consensus', however, then youth and youth culture provided more negative motifs.[14] As noted above, the emblem of youth had always tended to conflicting interpretation. Throughout the post-war period, unease as to just what young people were spending their money on, and just what they were doing with their time, were complemented by a succession of media-induced 'moral panics' that served to infuse youth culture with a sense of transgression.[15] Records, clothing, hairstyles and social space came to represent statements of identity; they seemingly contained the power—not always intentionally—to challenge existing social and cultural convention. Indeed, the emergence of such easily recognisable subcultural 'types' as teddy boys, rockers, beats, teeny-boppers, mods, hippies, skinheads, suedeheads, soul boys and punks all but invited social commentary as to their rationale, purpose and significance. Similarly, the infusion of black cultural influences into the sites, sounds and styles of British youth culture added a further dimension to both its appeal and, in some cases, its perceived disrepute. But where, at least in the 1960s, the social and generational tensions afforded by such developments were partly offset by the technological and economic advances of the period, so the social and political discontent fanned by Britain's mounting economic problems soon led to the more sanguine readings of youth culture to be buried beneath fears of hooliganism and moral degeneracy. In other words, the 'youth question'—and thus the meanings, consequences and impulses that drove youth

culture—informed wider debates as to problems of Britain's present and their implications for the future.

Here, then, we intend to look at specific examples of the ways by which elements of youth culture and popular music informed, reflected and responded to a period of notable social, economic and political change. More specifically, the articles contained in this edition of *Contemporary British History* relate to the period from the mid-to-late 1960s to the mid-1980s, during which the supposed consensus of Britain's post-war polity first cracked and then collapsed under the combined weight of various economic factors, internal tensions and political-ideological realignment.

First, we suggest that a focus on youth culture and popular music helps expose critical fault-lines in the very conception of a post-war consensus. Keith Gildart, for example, uses the work of Ray Davies and The Kinks to complement that of Hoggart, the CCCS and other social investigators of the 1960s who sought to explore continuity and rupture in the post-war working-class experience. In so doing, Gildart demonstrates how Davies' lyrics articulate the continued sense of class consciousness that existed beneath the prevailing lexicon of 'affluence', 'consensus' and the 'swinging sixties'. Similarly, Lez Henry and Anna Gough-Yates, respectively, explore the racial and gender limitations of 'consensus'. For Henry, Britain's reggae sound systems and the teachings of Rastafarianism provided overlapping sites of resistance for black youths alienated—and excluded—from mainstream British society. Gough-Yates, meanwhile, uses the *Shocking Pink* magazine to explore the ways by which feminists intervened into youth culture to extend their critique of the gendered ideological positions that had underpinned the 'consensus' and later been exposed by its dissolution. In their different ways, these three articles use youth culture and popular music to reveal the class, racial and gender limits to the consensus narrative, raising questions as to its construction as a concept and the extent to which it may be applied to the post-war British society.

Second, Bill Osgerby and Matthew Worley each explore ways by which youth culture served to dramatise and thereby inform the breakdown of the post-war order. Thus, Osgerby demonstrates how the burgeoning market in 'youth-exploitation' literature helped reaffirm the construction of a 'crisis' that has ultimately come to define the popular memory of Britain in the 1970s. Punk, too, seemed to embody the social and political dislocations of the period. In Worley's article, the appeal of punk is mediated through the simultaneous growth of political extremes in 1970s Britain. Third, and finally, Lucy Robinson engages with popular music's reaction to the changing socio-economic culture of the 1980s by mapping the rise of the charity singly as a response to Margaret Thatcher's retraction of the welfare state. For Robinson, the rise (and fall) of the charity single may be used to explore and expose the rationale of Thatcher's wider economic and political ideology. Like Osgerby and Worley, she points to a symbiotic relationship existing between youth culture, popular music and the processes of socio-economic and political change.

One final point: the articles contained in this special issue of CBH draw from a range of methodological approaches. They all, however, are based on the presumption that youth and youth culture matters. Throughout the 1960s–80s, as the socio-economic

and political alignments of the immediate post-war period transformed into the politics of neo-liberalism, so Britain's youth culture pre-empted, embodied, contributed to and reflected the processes of social, political and cultural change. It is hoped that this special issue will encourage further study into the ways and means by which the aspirations, values and experiences of a nation's youth help inform its past, present and future.

Notes

[1] For some notable exceptions, see Marwick, 'Youth in Britain, 1920–60', 37–51; Osgerby, *Youth Culture in Britain Since 1945*; Fowler, *Youth Culture in Modern Britain*; Horn, *Juke Box Britain*; Bartie, 'Moral Panics and Glasgow Gangs', 385–408. Interestingly, pre-Second World War youth culture has received as much—if not more—detailed historical attention. For example, Davies, *Gangs of Manchester*; Fowler, *First Teenagers*; Tebbutt, *Being Boys*. Historians of Europe have also been far more interested in youth and youth culture than their British counterparts. For example, Roseman, *Generations in Conflict*; Capussotti, *Gioventù perduta*; Schildt and Siegfried, *Between Marx and Coca-Cola*; Siegfried, *Time is on My Side*.

[2] For an excellent example, see Todd, *Young Women, Work and Family*.

[3] Gilles, *Youth and History*; Mitteraurer, *History of Youth*; Savage, *Teenage*.

[4] This, primarily, revolved around sociologists based at the University of Chicago; the so-called 'Chicago School'.

[5] For two important UK studies, see Downes, *Delinquent Solution*; Willmott, *Adolescent Boys of East London*.

[6] See, for a classic example, Hall and Jefferson, *Resistance Through Rituals*.

[7] For a sense of this, see Gelder and Thornton, *Subcultures Reader*.

[8] See Osgerby, *Youth Culture in Britain Since 1945*, 30–49. For a Marxist critique of how elements of how the 'culture industry' can be restrictive and debilitating, see Adorno and Horkheimer, 'Culture Industry', 120–67.

[9] Kavanagh and Morris, *Consensus Politics*; Seldon, 'Consensus', 501–14.

[10] For neat overviews of the debate, see Harrison, 'Rise Fall and Rise of Political Consensus', 301–24; Fraser, 'Post-War Consensus', 347–62. See also Pimlott, 'Myth of Consensus', 135–6; Jones and Kandiah, *Myth of Consensus*; Marquand, *Unprincipled Society*; Jefferys, *Retreat from the New Jerusalem*.

[11] Clarke, et al. 'Subcultures, Cultures and Class', 9–74.

[12] Hay, 'Chronicles of a Death Foretold', 446–70; 'Narrating Crisis', 253–77.

[13] For an overview, see Osgerby, *Youth Culture in Britain Since 1945*, Chapter 4.

[14] Clarke, et al. 'Subcultures, Cultures and Class', 21–8.

[15] The classic account of this is Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*.

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