

Youth Culture as Political Protest

How young people used music as a means of protest in
1970s and 1980s Britain

Outline:

Key Concepts:

- Cultural resistance
- Cultural hegemony
- Subcultural theory

Context:

- Race Relations
- Thatcher's Britain

Case Studies:

- Rock Against Racism
- Rock Against Sexism
- 2 Tone

The Idea of Resistance and Political Protest:

- When we first think about political protest, what comes to mind?
 - Attempts to change to laws or legislation
 - Organised political movements
 - Public protests
 - Petitions, marches
- However, we can look at political protest in terms of:
 - Cultural resistance
 - Everyday people
- Why look at cultural resistance?
 - Overt political protest is uncommon. When it occurs, it often results in a backlash.
 - Even if overt political protest does results in changes in legislation, it won't necessarily change public opinion.
 - Culture is what influences people's hearts, minds and opinions. This is the site of popular change.

Key idea: the political, personal and cultural are always intertwined

Cultural Hegemony:

- **Antonio Gramsci:** Italian philosopher writing in the 1930s



Key Terms:

- **Hegemonic:** dominant, ruling-class, power-holders
 - **Hegemonic culture:** *the* dominant culture
 - **Cultural hegemony:** power, rule, or domination maintained by ideological and cultural means.
 - **Ideology:** worldview - beliefs, assumptions and values
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- Cultural hegemony functions by framing the ideologies of the dominant social group as the only legitimate ideology.
 - The ideologies of the dominant group are expressed and maintained through its economic, political, moral, and social institutions (like the education system and the media).
 - These institutions socialise people into accepting the norms, values and beliefs of the dominant social group.
 - As a result, oppressed groups believe that the social and economic conditions of society are natural and inevitable, rather than created by the dominant group.

Subcultural Theory: The Birmingham School (1970s)

- In the 1970s, a group of cultural theorists in Birmingham applied Gramsci's theories to post-war British working-class youth culture
- Looked at working class cultures like the teddy-boys, mods, skinheads, and punks - subcultures unified by shared tastes in fashion, music and ideology.
- They argued that the formation of subcultures offered young working class people a solution to the problems they were collectively experiencing in society.

Positives of The Birmingham School's subcultural theory:

- Validated the study of popular culture - previously considered superficial

Criticism The Birmingham School's subcultural theory:

- Focused on white working class masculinity
- Ignored ethnic minority, female and queer youth cultures



Subculture:

What is a subculture?

- Working-class youth culture
- Unified by shared tastes in style, music and ideology
- A solution to collectively experienced problems
- A form of resistance to cultural hegemony

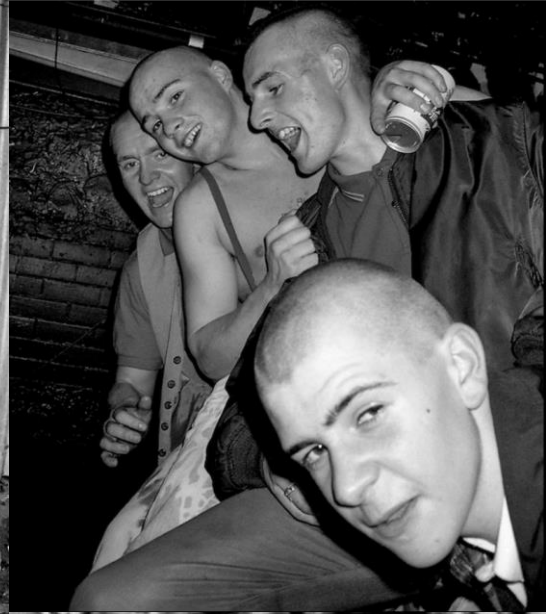
Teddy Boys: 1950/60s

- **Responding to:** post-war social changes
- **Music:** influenced by American rock n roll
- **Style:** upper-class Edwardian fashion (narrow trousers, lappelled jackets), fused with an element of rebelliousness in the form of exaggerated hairstyles and shoes (quiffs and creepers)



Skinheads: 1960s

- **Responding to:** social alienation.
- **Rejected:** late 50s conservatism, as well as the 'peace and love' middle class hippy movement of 60s
- **Expression of:** working class pride
- **Music:** West indian music (ska, rocksteady, reggae)
- **Style:** shaven heads, Dr Marten boots, braces, shirts, and cropped trousers
- **Politics:** Original skinheads were anti-racist, however the movement quickly polarised



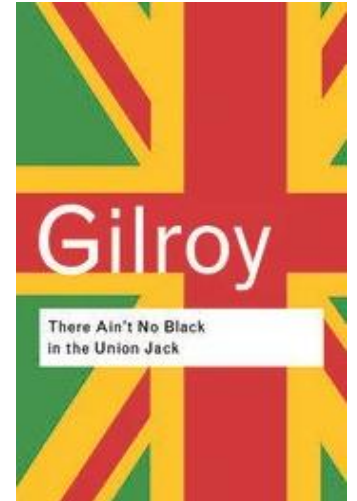
Punk: 1970s

- **A Reaction to:**
 - 1) Capitalist middle class culture that has achieved dominance and legitimacy (hegemony)
 - 2) Their alienation from the adult working class culture of their parents and grandparents
 - 3) The social, political and economic crisis of the mid 1970s, resulting in high youth unemployment
- **Values:** anti-establishment, emphasis on individual freedom, on doing it yourself.
- **Fashion:** emphasised ugliness, shock value, irony. Used items like safety pins, ripped shirts, chains.
- **Music:** often self-produced and independently distributed, the music is loud and aggressive, with lyrics expressing anti-establishment views and working class concerns.



Race:

- Bringing race into the picture in the 1980s, Paul Gilroy highlighted how black youth cultures represented cultural solutions to collectively experienced problems of racism and poverty.



Post-War British Race Relations:

- To understand the political significance of black music in the 1970s and 1980s, we must first understand the racial situation in post war Britain.
- After WW2, many Caribbean men and women migrated to Britain seeking jobs. They were faced with racism and discrimination, and found it difficult to find employment and housing.
- During the 1970s and 1980s, the children of these Caribbean immigrants were reaching adulthood. They were subject to violence and discrimination from both the state and far right groups. However, they more likely to resist the racism of British society compared with their parents.



Race Relations in the 1970s and 1980s:

Racism from the State: The Police

- Frequent clashes between the police and black youth
- Widespread fears over law and order, black street crime and the figure of 'the mugger'
- SUS laws
- New Cross Fire (1981)



Racism from Far-Right Groups: The NF

- The National Front was a far-right group
- Advocated the an end to immigration and the repatriation of non-white Britons.
- Blamed immigration for the decline in employment, housing and welfare.
- In the 1970s, the NF gained the support of disillusioned white youth
- Racial attacks, violence and intimidation



Margaret Thatcher:

- Prime Minister 1979-1990
- Militant campaigner for middle-class interests
- In an 1978 interview: 'British national identity could be swamped by people with different culture'
- Hardline attitude towards immigration
- Conservative Manifesto: 'firm immigration control for the future is essential if we are to achieve good community relations'
- British Nationality Act of 1981: introduced a series of increasingly tough immigration procedures and excluded Asian people from entering Britain.



Black Music as Resistance:

- Black music offered a means of articulating oppression and of challenging what Gilroy has termed, 'the capitalist system of racial exploitation and domination'.
- The lyrics of many reggae songs revolve around the black experience black history, black consciousness of economic and social deprivation, and a continuing enslavement in a racist ideology.
- Reggae is often sung in Jamaican patois, emphasising a black subjectivity that is independent from white hegemony.

Rude Boys: 1960s-80s

- **Music:** listened to 1960s Jamaican ska and 1970s roots reggae. Lyrics about oppression and poverty articulated their own experience. Also influenced by the anti-establishment ethic of 1970s punk.
- **Style:** influenced by Jamaican Rastafarianism and also British working class fashion. Focus on dressing 'sharp' - suits, shiny shoes, hats.
- **Reacting against:** oppression from the state, police, and racist thugs. Also against the 'peace and love' aspect of the rasta culture. Instead, emphasised self-confidence.



Rock Against Racism:

- RAR campaigned against racism in the music industry and against the rise of fascism among white working class youth between 1976 and 1981.
- It was formed on the assumption that popular music could educate their audiences away from prejudice through example. They focused on addressing white working class youth who were vulnerable to NF recruitment.
- It capitalised on the emerging genres of punk and reggae, which provided an oppositional language through which RAR could communicate its anti-racist politics.
- RAR organised hundreds of musical events, gigs and carnivals featuring famous punk bands (like the Clash and X-ray Spex) on the same stage as black bands (like Steel Pulse, Aswad). Putting black and white bands on the same stage together was a new phenomena, and was highly successful in producing a theatrical statement of multiculturalism and solidarity.
- RAR's fusion of youth culture and politics has been widely celebrated for making politics fun. This fusion of politics and culture engaged disaffected white youth in the face of profound political and economic insecurity, class tensions and escalating racism.





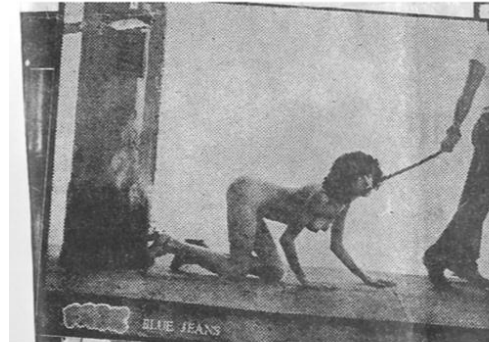
Rock Against Sexism:

- Rock Against Sexism was British anti-sexist campaign that used punk as a vehicle to challenge sexism, promoting female musicians while challenging discrimination in the music industry between 1979 and 1982.
- To raise both consciousness and funds, a small group of RAS activists in London organised musical events, printed publications, and hosted musical and discussion workshops.
- Profits were donated to organisations like the National Abortion Campaign, Women's Aid and Rape Crisis



Why was RAS needed?

- First, 1970s saw a plethora of sexist song lyrics, record covers and band advertisements, many depicting violence towards women.
- Second, there were few role models for female instrumentalists, perpetuating a masculine culture within rock music.
- Third, when female musicians did break into the mainstream, the music press was often mocking, criticising and patronising.
- Finally, the terms 'feminism' and 'sexism' were not in common currency during this time, and there was widespread skepticism among young people with regards to organised feminism.



2 Tone

- 2 Tone was a genre of British popular music, that fused punk with Jamaican reggae and ska music.
- The name of the genre derives from 2 Tone Records, a record label founded in 1979 by Jerry Dammers of The Specials, and articulates a desire to transcend Britain's racial divides.
- The bands on the Two Tone label were largely multicultural, for example the Specials, the Selecter, Madness, the Beat and the Bodysnatchers. This was the practical realisation of the anti-discriminatory ambitions of Rock Against Racism. While RAR brought black and white musicians onto the same stage, Two-Tone brought black and white musicians into the same bands.
- 2 Tone bands came to prominence during Margaret Thatcher's first term in office as PM. The songs addressed the political issues of the day: racism, sexism, violence, unemployment, youth culture, and were highly critical of the police, and the authoritarian government.
- Similar to punk's susceptibility to right-wing interpretation, 2 Tone also attracted the attention of right-wing youth. 2 Tone concerts were often inflated by members of the National Front or British Movement, disputing gigs and Sieg Heiling. The contradictions of race were reproduced and at times amplified in the tense atmospheres characteristic of 2 Tone gigs.
- In addition to these threats, the bands had to tackle their own prejudices towards each other, highlighting the challenges of mixing different class, racial and educational backgrounds. Reading the autobiography of Pauline Black of the Selecter demonstrates how she faced oppression because of her gender: 'There was a double standard in the band. Certain members paid lip service to the 2 Tone ethos that espoused non-sexism, but couldn't live up to that ideal in the real world'.
- By summer 1981, while Britain experienced rioting across many cities, with Specials at the top of the charts with 'Ghost Town', 2 Tone imploded and many of the bands split up.

