

Living with racism and the Front



On EMI Records and Tapes

'Racism' slogan first appeared on the first Tom Webster album. It became the symbol of the Rock Against Racism movement after two albums.

lost in the mire of nihilism. The adherents had been informed that society was rotten to the core, that the government did not care and that the future looked even worse. They were not told how things might be changed for the better.

The seventies saw working class delinquency go through several phases. Each phase, including the punk image, operated within the bounds of society, no matter how hostile it appeared to be on the surface. None of the movements managed to replace the traditional values, the reliance on fluid social mobility and the accompanying desire for material acquisitions. Syd Vicious is dead and the Boomtown Rats now fill the concert halls as quickly as the Rolling Stones once did. So what is new?

The hippies and the Front

The "cultural rebels" represent a middle-class stratum, a class that has traditionally been strong in Britain. Yet, since "hippie-culture" originated in the United States, it often took some time to permeate Britain. It did so, partly through the well-known medium of the Beatles, who were resurrected as a transcendental force in 1967. Cannabis was sold freely in schools in the early seventies and rivalled beer as a marketable commodity on the university campuses throughout the first half of the decade. Since this was also common to North America, elaboration is not really necessary.

Hippiedom did not last. It did lead however to a revival of religious and spiritual sects. To walk down London's Tottenham Court Road in 1975 was to ensure one thing. If you were not accosted by the Hari Krishnas at the southern end, then the Scientologists would have grabbed you before you reached the northern one. The Guru Mahara Ji purchased a mansion in Highgate and flew in frequently in his personal jumbo jet. In turn, Jesus came back, not in the Scriptural form, but as a new, commercial variety, gift-wrapped and imported direct from the U.S.A.

Brake's final category of youth, the "political militant" arose in the early seventies like a savage wolf seeking its

prey and ended the decade like a whimpering hyena in search of a home. Of course, political extremism owed more to the revolutionary heyday of 1968, when student activism reached an unprecedented peak in Paris and London. It was not uncommon then for students to have busts of Karl Marx on their desks, for an unpopular University Vice-Chancellor to find his morning coffee interrupted by the sizzling sound of a molotov cocktail hurtling through his office window.

In London, during the mid-seventies, political activity became feverish for a period, due to the alarming growth of John Tyndall and Martin Webster's openly racist National Front. This party would organize marches and rallies in black or East Indian neighborhoods, bearing Union Jacks and closely guarded by the police. Leftists, most notably the Socialist Workers Party, would hold a counter-demonstration, which invariably ensured press and TV coverage. In 1975, after an especially brutal clash at Red Lion Square, one SWP supporter was killed after a mounted police unit charged the leftists.

The decade winds down

The battles continued. For once, the splinter groups of the left; Trotskyites, Marxist-Leninists, and anarchists could unite against a common enemy. For a brief period, when Trotskyites began also to infiltrate the British Labour Party, it seemed as though the polarization of politics had achieved a breakthrough for the Left. The new Labour prime-minister, "Sunny Jim" Callaghan appeared perplexed and concerned, as several Labour MPs were ousted from their constituencies by militants, on the often quite justifiable grounds that they had done virtually nothing since they had been elected.

However, the National Front fell victim to its own foul policies and the militants returned to their old private squabbles. One final incident is worthy of note. Upon being refused permission to hold a march in an immigrant area of Leeds, Front Leader, the rotund, almost archetypal Nazi, Martin Webster decided on a personal march under police

protection. The SWP, resourceful for once, ignored the lone figure and calmly assembled at the back door of Leeds police station. The unwitting Webster was eventually ushered through the station and escorted out of the back door, which was then locked behind him. Poor Martin

In the late-seventies, youth and campus militancy suffered a decline. Student unions embraced the Conservative cause long before Margaret Thatcher's advent to power. The seventies ended with a steel strike, but this was hardly the product of marxist propaganda. If there is one overriding theme to this personalized account of the seventies, then that theme is disillusionment. An overcrowded island, giant urban centres and a government which is banking on the rich. Where will "youth culture" go in the eighties? My hope is that the vibrancy inherent in the character of British youth will find some source of fulfillment.



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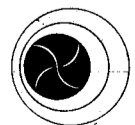
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