



Simon Frith

Youth in the Eighties: a dispossessed generation

Youth have, traditionally, been seen but not heard, a consuming style but not a political voice. As the media's bewildered response to the riots made clear, no one had been listening to youth's rough music except the young themselves. The young had been talked about more than ever in the last decade, but they had not been heard. In the endless radio and TV specials that followed the massive rise in youth unemployment young people spoke, but always as if to an audience of the deaf. Young voice after young voice pointed out the futility of the Youth Opportunities Programme (YOP); adult voice after adult voice called for more of the same. The Manpower Services Commission (MSC) remains, even after Thatcher, the central success of the corporate state, as civil servants, employers and trade unionists scheme together, unaccountably, for the unemployed.

The job

For a moment this summer youth themselves

challenged the resulting consensus. The rush of words — 'riots', 'hooligans', 'agitators' — couldn't conceal a systematic disaffection, and in the last few months the criticisms made by the young of YOP schemes have become so loud and, in some places, so well organised (in strikes and demonstrations) that local trade unions (notably NUPE) have had to respond.

The significance of youth as a political group, though, remains unclear. The riot inquiries have been taken up, rightly, with the problem of policing and whatever Scarman reports he is unlikely to take the young rioters themselves seriously. The riots are by now taken to be symptoms of social breakdown, not political acts in themselves, and Scarman isn't going to challenge the establishment belief that such rebellion is best dealt with by putting the young to work.

The TUC, meanwhile, rejected the radical pre-Conference proposal that it withdraw support from YOP and the MSC altogether.

Conference agreed that youth training schemes needed tighter monitoring (if only to protect adult labour) but the demand for an improvement in YOP's training component remains rhetorical as long as employers decide what training means—which they do, by YOP definition. The TUC has launched a Jobs for Youth campaign ('to focus national attention on the problems associated with youth employment') but it is less clear that it would support, let alone initiate, real action by the young themselves — a national strike, say, by YOP trainees for an increase in their £23.50 per week 'allowance'. The TUC continues to support, however implicitly, the argument that whatever the cheap labour benefits employers gain from YOP, the young unemployed themselves should be grateful for low paid work. If the July riots were a serious shock to the British political system, then, the shock has already been absorbed, as just one more media moment. The political response to mass youth unemployment remains much as it has always been: youth idleness leads to disorganised, meaningless violence; the solution is a state training scheme (which, admittedly, needs 'improvement').

The politics of youth is a problem for the Left too. 'Nearly half of Britain's 750,000 young unemployed,' reported the *Sunday Times* at the beginning of September, 'believe that violence to bring about political change can be justified.' But this MORI poll account of youth's militant anti-Thatcherism is scarcely evidence that the young are political in any straight forward socialist sense. About the same number of young people questioned by MORI believed that 'immigrants should be sent back to where they came from', and as long as the dominant image of white youth violence is the skinhead, the Left, as well as the Right, is going to be concerned about the implications of youth's political disaffection.

Black youth

The contradictions involved in youth politics were obvious in the riots themselves. The most savage episodes (Brixton, Toxteth, Moss Side) involved the police and blacks. West Indian youth face the most systematic discrimination in their search for work, places to live, places to go, and the effect of such discrimination is to put them up against the police continually. Black youth, living on the street, have to subsist on street skills (smallscale hustling, pilfering, dealing). The dividing line the police like to draw between villains and decent citizens is impossible to define, and so all young blacks are treated as muggers and thieves (as chief constables blandly admit). Such 'sensible policing' has, in the last five years, criminalised black youth

culture especially as, at the same time, much of black youth's struggle with the police has been for the use of public space. The police task has always been to control public places, to prevent mobs gathering, and in such street confrontations in communities like Brixton, blacks are, for the police, the enemy.

If in the black youth riots the police were taken on as both the authoritarian and the racist state, in other riots these strands were untangled. The Southall riot began as a fight between skinheads and Asian youths. Anger quickly shifted to the police, but because they were protecting the skinheads in a way they have rarely protected Asian communities — the implicit Asian demand was for more not less policing of their streets.

Taki-bashing' has been a skinhead pastime since 1968, and if in the last twelve months anti-Asian terror has become more vicious, this is because the British Movement has taken over from the more 'respectable' National Front the organisation of white youth. But the irony of skinhead facism (the irony of the Southall riot) remains: in other circumstances the skinheads' enemy is the police. The most violently anti-authoritarian youth music is not reggae but oi, and skinhead racism itself is an unstable combination of bravado, style and ideology. It is a way of making sense of the white experience of Thatcherism, and the NF and British Movement have a purchase on a section of white youth precisely because they do seem to take seriously the daily assertions of Tory politicians and newspapers that Britain has been swamped by immigrants. Skinheads find it easy to explain Pakibashing — 'they' have taken 'our' jobs — and such an explanation is the logical effect of immigration laws and rhetoric, Tory and Labour alike.

A power struggle

Skinhead racism is not, then, some sort of 'spontaneous' expression of working class values. It is, rather, an aspect of bourgeois racist ideology and the skinhead 'we' can (in much oi music, for example) have a very different reference — not white versus black, but youth versus authority. White youth like black youth, skinheads in particular, are an instant target for police harassment; white youth, like black youth, have to argue continually for use of public space. The 'copycat riots' that followed Southall and Toxteth were, indeed, an escalation of weekend battles that have been fought by youth and police for the last thirty years. As many police chiefs agreed, what the press described as 'riots' were, for them, 'routine disturbances' (and by August were again being reported as such). The young, in other words, have

always been bored. Their boredom has always focused on public places. The police have always tried to keep them from congregating. The settings for youth/police fighting change — dance halls in the 1950s, football matches in the 1970s, the streets in the 1980s — but the immediate causes don't, and the political problem is to relate this casual, long established power struggle to the new issues and experiences of unemployment.

One difficulty here is that our thinking about youth is dominated by assumptions taken from academic sub-cultural theories which split youth cultures into the 'rough' and the 'respectable' and assign the rough (from Teds to skins) the most class consciousness. Such a starting point has a number of dubious consequences — while male street culture is romanticised, girls are defined out of the working class and 'ordinary' young people are taken to have no political interest at all — but I want to make two more general points.

Firstly, sub-cultural theory defines youth groups in terms of their consumption habits. Youth is recognised as a social category by its style and so making sense of youth politics means making sense of youth styles, reading

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them as complex, contradictory expressions of class values and ideas. Youth, in other words, is meaningful only as a subjective social group: the young relate to society in a distinct way as a matter of their own choice (what clothes they put on: what records they buy) and so the politics of youth is a politics of gesture. The difficulty is to relate such symbolic resistance to the material struggles for power by which *all* young workers are defined — struggles not just in the labour market but, more importantly, in the family — youth as a social category only makes sense as an aspect of the family, a point recent sociology has evaded.

A generation

Secondly, sub-cultural theorists ignore the significance of youth as generation. Youth experience is historically significant (and thus in the last thirty years the concept of teenager, young person as a consumer, has switched meaning: a term which once

referred to working class youth now refers to middle class youth, the only young people for whom the problems of consumption remain paramount; teenage pop music is, now, an exclusively middle class concern). The importance of the stress on youth as generation is that it draws attention to the fact that youth is a social category as a matter of state policy (as well as of individual style). Youth becomes a significant social group because it is treated as significant — by welfare bureaucrats and housing committees, by employers and governments, by the police force. And youth policies change. Youth unemployment is a new phenomenon in postwar Britain. It has been a problem of any sort only since 1972, and today's adolescents are the first generation not to leave school, go to work, grow up quite smoothly (whatever their sub-cultural identities — their parents were the affluent rock'n'roll teenagers of the 1950s).

This is the historical context in which sensational youth sub-cultures have to be related to 'ordinary' family and labour market experiences, in which we have to sort out what was new about the youth riots, how much was gesture, how much something of more permanent political significance. One effect of youth unemployment, for example, is that school leavers continue to identify not with a class, with workmates of all ages, but with families and friends and neighbours on the streets. It is in these groups (no longer broken up by jobs and new experiences) that unemployment is interpreted and so immediate political identifications are not socialist but 'nationalist' — after a decade of youth unemployment only ethnically based political groups can claim to have recruited youth with any systematic success.

The state defines youth

The failure of the socialist Left to interest the young hasn't been through lack of effort. Every socialist organisation has seized its opportunity to reform its youth section, to apply punk graphics to a newspaper, to reverse its line on rock'n'roll. But models of politics based on the workplace can't be applied to people who have never been in a workplace. The young unemployed don't have bosses and can't join unions; wages and conditions on YOP schemes are not a matter of immediate negotiation, but are decided bureaucratically, by the government. The point is that youth is an objectively constructed category. Young people are, as a significant social group, the *effect* of changing class and familial relations and it is these that we have to understand. The young are not just accidental victims of the recession; they are, rather, being actively redefined as an

aspect of the state's solution to the recession, and this, in the end, is what the politics of you this about.

Youth unemployment is a permanent condition of all capitalist economies. It reflects not just the immediate recession, but also long term shifts in the labour process. To put the argument starkly: there is no longer a place at work for the young—in as far as they get jobs it is as quasi-adults, with all the qualities of steadiness and responsibility that implies. Young people who haven't 'settled down', who are 'untrained', are, from now on, going to be the state's responsibility. State agencies are going to determine what it means to be young.

The Thatcher government argues that the young have priced themselves out of the labour market. Youth labour (ie, labour without experience/skill/discipline) had a market value when it was cheap but cannot compete with adult labour otherwise. Tory policy, then, involves the reconstruction of youth as cheap labour — its cheapness the result not of free collective bargaining but of direct state intervention. The MSC aim to remove school leavers from the unemployment register and to feed them back into the system as low paid trainees (it is 'fair', apparently, that such trainees have half the pay of 'a normal young employee'). In her

post-riot measures Mrs Thatcher herself offered employers a subsidy (£15 a week) if they took on under 18 year olds cheaply (paying them less than £40 a week).

Cheap and malleable

The slogan 'training for all' means defining youth not just as cheap labour, but also as malleable labour — trainees are excluded from the normal processes of trade union bargaining; they are heavily subject to the ideological argument that they are lucky to have a job. The concept of 'training' itself is ideologically misleading. Most youth training schemes, most work experience programmes, do not give young people marketable qualifications, do not equip them with real skills or offer them a career. This generation of MSC graduates is always going to be the most vulnerable sector of the labour force.

The model for MSC training policy is West Germany (the influence is direct, via EEC training policies and YOP funding) where all 15-18 year old school leavers have the constitutional right to day release education and 90% of them register on three year 'apprenticeships'. Such apprentices are cheap (they get, at best, half the adult wage even for doing an adult job), disciplined and disorganised (40% of them are in small, low

paying, non-unionised firms — the model for the Tories' subsidy policy). And in Germany, as in Britain, youth 'training' is of variable quality: most apprentices can expect to spend their adult life in and out of jobs that have little to do with their original instruction. Thus what was first demanded as a working class right — the right to a skill—is, in Dan Finn's words, 'returned in an unrecognisable form, as a period of cheap labour with employers who have forms of disciplinary control which would not be tolerated if applied to adult workers'.

This German system is often described (by Shirley Williams, for example) as the only democratic approach to youth — it involves training for everyone; all 15-18 year olds are given an equal right to state resources. But what is involved in such a 'universal' training policy (and this is already happening in Britain) is a tightening up of the skill hierarchy, as young people are divided earlier and more sharply between the academic and the industrial stream, as mobility between the two is limited by the state's rationing of educational resources, as the young are encouraged more and more to hang on to what they've got.

Current employment policies involve the state in the construction of youth as a particular section of the labour force —

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cheap, disciplined, clearly demarcated from both adult workers and from their peers in higher education. The politics of youth involves resistance to this process, but youth unemployment itself is experienced not in class terms — the struggle for work, capital versus labour — but in generational terms — the struggle for independence, youth versus the family and the state. In as far as the young are cheap labour (whether getting a wage, the dole or a YOP allowance) they remain dependent on their parents for housing, feeding, subsistence. They are bound to the family—this is a particular problem for girls, who find it harder to get work than boys, are paid less and are expected to earn their keep with domestic labour. And in as far as youth are idle their 'leisure' becomes a matter of dispute. Street youth culture (and this was one theme of the riots) is beginning to involve not simply sub-cultural territorialism (the defence of an established, if mythical, working class 'community') but also a search for room of one's own — the physical room, leisure room, sexual room in which to establish a new sort of community. As the young unemployed become, like students, dependent on state and family resources, so they are beginning to demand the independent leisure institutions and resources that students already take for granted.

New forms of organisation and struggle

In an article I wrote for *Time Out* earlier this year I queried the assumption that everyone out of work is miserable, but the question posed by the riots was, rather, whether misery must be passive or whether it contains the seeds of new sorts of organisation and struggle. The young are less tied to the family than the adult unemployed; they have a more fluid relationship to the economy. It is easier for them to hustle. And what such hustling confronts is not despair but the state — DHSS officials, the police, social workers, every adult concerned to stop the young carving out their own space. The state's fear (evident in every MSC report, redoubled since the riots) is that the more successfully the young learn to survive nonwork, the less willing (and able) they'll be to do 'real' work. Hence the ideological and physical crackdown (experienced by black youth long before the riots) on any suggestion that the young unemployed are enjoying themselves.

As hustlers, surviving in the interstices of a declining welfare state, the immediate political problems for an increasing number of young people is how to deal with a cruelly niggling authority. Riots are a spontaneous, destructive expression of the resulting frustration and rage, and the question they leave behind is whether the communities in



for young people themselves the fundamental problem is not unemployment but powerlessness

Brixton and Toxteth, in London and Manchester, can act together in any other way. The problem is not simply how to recruit youth to established political organisations and practices, but how to respond organisationally to the political issues that youth are raising for themselves.

Youth music, punk and post punk, hasn't just described squalour, tedium and aggravation — it has been a means of handling them, a source of tolerance and hope. In the wake of the riots adult commentators hastily listened to old records — finding despair in punk, violence in oi, etc. What they missed was the fun and the defiance, the ways in which black and white groups like the Beat and UB 40, inner city intellectuals like The Fall and The Au Pairs, have turned tension into a dance floor drive. The sound of the riots — The Specials' doomed two-toned party music — was being played every hour on Radio 1 even as, on the news bulletins in between, the experts wondered what on earth was going on.

What kind of work

Most analyses of the riots move as fast as possible from the action to the 'underlying' causes. My suggestion is that youth's immediate concerns — the police, boredom, the thrill and fear of exercising collective power — were the political issues. Youth politics does not mean the campaigns carried

out on their behalf by such adult groups as Youthaïd, but involves, rather, a challenge to adult assumptions. As I suggested in *Time Out*, it takes a complex set of mechanisms — not just the financial deprivations involved, but definitions of work and play, the public and the private, masculinity and femininity — to make nonwork a miserable experience. It is these mechanisms that some strands of youth culture now challenge and it is to reinforce them that the state intervenes in young people's lives — if the young were to learn to enjoy 'unearned' leisure then the concept of earned leisure itself would be thrown into question. In these terms the right not to work (for low pay, under YOP discipline, at a tedious task) lies at the centre of youth politics and needs to be taken seriously by all socialists. However depressed they are by idleness, for young people themselves the fundamental problem is not unemployment but powerlessness. What matters, in the words of Suzy Croft and Peter Beresford, is 'the sense of being unused, pushed around, excluded, treated without respect, being at the mercy of others.' The issue is not just work and pay, but what kind of work, what kind of pay. If to be young in 1981 is to be excluded from the labour market, it is also to be dubious about the rationality of that market. For the young, more clearly than for anyone else, capitalism doesn't work, and the most difficult political question is not how to ease them back into the system, but how to build on their criticisms of it. _____D

This article began as a polemic in *Time Out* and developed as a paper for the CSE Conference in Bradford in July and a report on the riots for the *Village Voice*. Many thanks to Mandy Merck, Bob Christgau, everyone at the youth seminar at the CSE and, especially, Dan Finn.