

Rock Against Racism, founded in London in 1976, was an effort to reorient pop music toward a substantive commitment to antiracism, which included concerts, fanzines, records, and mass protest, as well as support for self-defense against street violence by the Far Right. Rock Against Racism demanded that music, particularly punk and reggae, not be escapes from the everyday, the street, and politics, but be deeply informed by and answerable to these domains. Rock Against Racism attempted to make explicit the implicit promise of agency and social transformation that punk rock's inchoate subcultural rebellion promised.

These upstarts were trying to prove that punk aesthetics and antiracist political organizing might cohere. To them, popular culture mattered, it was vibrant, and it was politically up for grabs. Practically, according to Syd Shelton, a member of the organizing committee and RAR's most prolific photographer, "The SWP did supply troops on the ground: people to put out leaflets; put up posters; sell badges and our fanzine." As a result of these efforts, circulation of Temporary Hoarding peaked at over twelve thousand copies, and more than one hundred thousand people attended each of the two London "carnivals" RAR organized in 1978. Thompson's fellow social historian Raphael Samuel described the first RAR carnival as "the most working-class demonstration I have been on" and a unique enough event "to have sensibly changed the climate of public opinion."

More zines by 1312 Press can be found at 1312press.noblogs.org

Rank And File Antiracism



**Historicizing Punk and Rock
Against Racism
by Stuart Schrader**

Searchlight. “Head-Banging for Hitler.” November 19, 1979.

Sewell, William H., Jr. “The Political Unconscious of Social and Cultural History; or, Confessions of a Former Quantitative Historian.” In *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation*, 22–80. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005

Smith, Evan. “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, no. 2 (2011): 85–117.

Thompson, E. P. “Agenda for a Radical History.” In *Making History: Writings on History and Culture*, 358–64. New York: New Press, 1994.

Warner, Chuck. 2007. “Messthetics #103.” CD liner notes, Hyped 2 Death.

“Raucous and countercultural”: RAR (Rock Against Racism) or RHR (Radical History Review)?¹ The movement and this journal actually shared a point of origin. Rock Against Racism, founded in London in 1976, was an effort to reorient pop music toward a substantive commitment to antiracism, which included concerts, fanzines, records, and mass protest, as well as support for self-defense against street violence by the Far Right. Rock Against Racism demanded that music, particularly punk and reggae, not be escapes from the everyday, the street, and politics, but be deeply informed by and answerable to these domains. Rock Against Racism attempted to make explicit the implicit promise of agency and social transformation that punk rock’s inchoate subcultural rebellion promised.

Analogously, Radical History Review, originally a newsletter for the Mid-Atlantic Radical Historians’ Organization (MARHO), which was founded in New York City in 1973, represented an effort to shift historical research toward the political margins and to appreciate the agency of the less powerful. Not only was social history compelling for the New Left generation to study, but the soundest way to bridge a divide between “the academy and active experience” was to foreground “an awareness of the institutional and ideological determinations of the societies in which we work” so that historical analysis could be a tool for transforming those determinations, used by and for people at the margins.²

E. P. Thompson and other British social historians expressed this underpinning commitment to the agency of common people. According to Ian Goodyer, it is with these intellectuals that the shared origins of RAR and RHR can be discovered. Dissident Communist and New Left historians influenced the formation of MARHO and the creation of this journal, as well as the radicals who founded Rock Against Racism.

They attempted to “rescue the history of working people from obscurity in order to reinstate workers as subjects, rather than mere objects, of history.” This effort, dovetailing with what Goodyer labels “humanist Marxism,” meant rejecting methodological orthodoxies and hierarchical approaches to historiography. It also called for a disposition that was open to idiosyncratic forms of political and cultural expression.³

For its part, Rock Against Racism, whose original organizers orbited the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), also aimed to challenge ossified beliefs—not least by insisting that mass culture was a central terrain for working-class struggle and antiracist politics. Lasting five years in its original guise, Rock Against Racism proclaimed that young people whose consciousness had not yet been pricked by leftwing organizers might yet retain political agency worth understanding and engaging. At the same time, “many of the key figures” who founded RAR “stayed loyal to their overarching commitment to the labour movement and revolutionary socialism,” an orientation diminishing among historians through the 1980s.⁴ Notably, Thompson himself nastily dismissed an attempt by the Anti-Nazi League, coorganized by the SWP alongside RAR, to curry his support.⁵

Rock Against Racism almost immediately became a topic of scholarly debate, largely based on personal experience and anecdotal accounts.⁶ Although participants largely remember it in positive terms, much of the original scholarship on it was negative. Today, some histories based in the archives revise these accounts: Crisis Music by Goodyer and Never Again by David Renton.⁷ Additionally, a handsome photo book called Rock Against Racism and two compilations featuring recollections of key participants, as well as some documents from the time period, are available. (Renton cites these four other recent books.) Crisis Music rebuts many of the cynical early analyses of Rock Against Racism and the punk rock explosion more broadly. And Never Again explains how Rock Against Racism and the broader Anti-Nazi League substantially advanced antiracist politics, as Renton delves into the internal history of the National Front.

Reading these books with Donald J. Trump in the White House, who has expressed support for public demonstrations by right-wing extremists and opposition to antifa, it is difficult not to try to apply their messages to the present. My focus, however, is on the unique sociohistorical conjuncture that gave rise both to punk rock itself and Rock Against Racism, in an effort to historicize the turn to culture as political battleground amid the shifting fortunes of mass Left politics. If the turn to culture among historians today lacks the spark of excitement it once did, a reinvigoration of the labor movement as a key node in the fight

Goswami, Manu. “Remembering the Future.” *American Historical Review* 113, no. 2 (2008): 417–24.

Huddle, Roger, and Red Saunders, eds. *Reminiscences of RAR: Rocking Against Racism 1976–1982*. London: Redwords, 2016.

Nikpour, Golnar. “White Riot: Another Failure.” *Maximum Rocknroll*, January 17, 2012. maximumrocknroll.com/white-riot-another-failure.

Novick, Peter. *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

Rachel, Daniel, ed. *Walls Come Tumbling Down: Rock Against Racism, 2 Tone and Red Wedge*. London: Picador, 2017.

Renton, Dave. *Never Again: Rock Against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League 1976–1982*. New York: Routledge, 2019.

Renton, Dave. *When We Touched the Sky: The Anti-Nazi League 1977–1981*. Cheltenham: New Clarion, 2006.

Reynolds, Simon. *Rip It Up and Start Again: Postpunk 1978–1984*. New York: Penguin, 2006.

Sabin, Roger. “‘I Won’t Let That Dago By’: Rethinking Punk and Racism.” In *Punk Rock: So What? The Cultural Legacy of Punk*, edited by Roger Sabin, 199–218. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Savage, Jon. *England’s Dreaming: Anarchy, Sex Pistols, Punk Rock, and Beyond*. New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2001.

Schrader, Stuart. “Fiendens Musik.” *Shit-Fi*, August 2015. shit-fi.com/fiendens-musik.

Schrader, Stuart. “I Don’t Wanna Be a Mercenary: Punk Rock versus the Mercenary Movement in the 1970s.” *Shit-Fi*, June 2015. shit-fi.com/mercenaries.

Schrader, Stuart. “New Wave vs. Black Lung!?” *Shit-Fi*, January 2010. shit-fi.com/new_wave_vs_black_lung.

Schrader, Stuart. “A Rotten Legacy?” *Brooklyn Rail* (December–January 2009–2010).

problems of their analysis: "Both heavy metal and disco bands were excluded from RAR line-ups, for example, presumably on the grounds that they were a form of false consciousness" ("Rock Against Racism and Red Wedge," 76). A 1979 *New Musical Express* interview with RAR collective members specifically addressed why metal and disco bands did not appear on RAR bills; false consciousness was not the problem. Widgery asserted, "We don't have any ideological bans on any kind of music" (Renton, *Never Again*, 152).

30. Sewell, "Political Unconscious of Social and Cultural History," 54; Eley, *Crooked Line*; Goswami, "Remembering the Future."

31. Renton, *Never Again*, 172.

References

- Callinicos, Alex. "The Fire This Time." *International Socialism* (first series) 104 (January 1978): 5–8.
- Dawson, Ashley. "'Love Music Hate Racism': The Cultural Politics of the Rock Against Racism Campaigns, 1976–1981." *Postmodern Culture* 16, no. 1 (2005): n.p.
- Duncombe, Stephen, and Maxwell Tremblay, eds. *White Riot: Punk Rock and the Politics of Race*. New York: Verso, 2011.
- Eley, Geoff. *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005.
- Forbes, Robert, and Eddie Stampton. *The White Nationalist Skinhead Movement: UK & USA, 1979–1993*. Port Townsend, WA: Feral House, 2015.
- Frith, Simon, and John Street. "Rock Against Racism and Red Wedge: From Music to Politics, From Politics to Music." In *Rockin' the Boat: Mass Music and Mass Movements*, edited by Reebee Garofalo, 67–80. Boston, MA: South End, 1992.
- Gilroy, Paul. "Rebel Souls: Dance-Floor Justice and the Temporary Undoing of Britain's Babylon." In *Rock Against Racism*, edited by Syd Shelton, 23–26. London: Autograph ABP, 2015.
- Gilroy, Paul. "There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack": *The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.
- Goodyer, Ian. *Crisis Music: The Cultural Politics of Rock Against Racism*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2019.

against the resurgent Far Right is welcome today: these books suggest that the battle against it will not be won in the cultural realm alone.

SWP versus NF via RAR

Goodyer locates the core of Rock Against Racism's approach within the particularities of the Socialist Workers Party. Founders of RAR such as David Widgery drew on SWP resources and were party members on its dissident edge. RAR's six-member elected organizing committee, as well as the collective that produced its fanzine *Temporary Hoarding*, did sometimes conflict with SWP leadership, but Goodyer draws on internal records to show that the leadership mostly took a hands-off approach. These upstarts were trying to prove that punk aesthetics and antiracist political organizing might cohere. To them, popular culture mattered, it was vibrant, and it was politically up for grabs. Practically, according to Syd Shelton, a member of the organizing committee and RAR's most prolific photographer, "The SWP did supply troops on the ground: people to put out leaflets; put up posters; sell badges and our fanzine."⁸ As a result of these efforts, circulation of *Temporary Hoarding* peaked at over twelve thousand copies, and more than one hundred thousand people attended each of the two London "carnivals" RAR organized in 1978. Thompson's fellow social historian Raphael Samuel described the first RAR carnival as "the most working-class demonstration I have been on" and a unique enough event "to have sensibly changed the climate of public opinion."⁹

Other analyses deemphasize the Socialist Workers Party in Rock Against Racism's trajectory. Renton has previously written about the Anti-Nazi League, the SWP's effort to form a united front and ally with the Labour Party and smaller leftist organizations against the growing Far Right. He offers evidence, which Goodyer confirms, that the party's energies were more focused on the League than RAR.¹⁰ Critical of the Anti-Nazi League but fond of Rock Against Racism, Paul Gilroy acknowledges SWP's "important" role while remaining skeptical of its "approach to culture and mistaken tendency to imagine RAR as a redemptive infusion of socialist ideology into the nihilistic misery of Punk."¹¹ Unlike other left-wing organizations, such as the Communist Party of Great Britain, the SWP did not aim to ally against the Far Right with centrists who did not share other aspects of their political program. Instead, it would confront the National Front directly.

Formed as a reconfiguration of the International Socialists, the Socialist Workers Party maintained several aspects that would contribute to the rise of Rock Against Racism, according to Goodyer. As Trotskyists,

meaning relatively free of the Stalinist hangover, the SWP did not dismiss US mass culture out of hand. Rock and roll was legitimate.¹² More importantly, the SWP “oriented itself upon the militant minority within the working class” and fostered rank-and-file activism “as an alternative to what many saw as conservative and bureaucratic union leaderships.”¹³ This orientation toward “socialism from below” and the possibility of rank-and-file self-activity informed RAR. In the September 1976 open letter published in the music press to announce RAR’s founding, which attacked Eric Clapton’s racist endorsements of Enoch Powell, Red Saunders called for a “rank and file movement against the racist poison in rock music.”¹⁴

Rank-and-file militancy shaped the labor movement of the early 1970s, with waves of strikes, including unofficial or wildcat actions. In 1977, punk’s explosion coincided with a labor convulsion. The number of working days lost to strikes in the United Kingdom peaked that year, after declining for the prior two. But material gains for workers were limited.¹⁵ As Goodyer astutely points out, the SWP orientation toward such often youthful and exuberant pushes for control over both union programs and the labor process itself “reached its apogee at precisely the moment when such a perspective became fatally undermined.” The reasons are complex and affected most industrialized countries simultaneously, while also having specific coordinates in the United Kingdom. There, trade unions and the Labour Party had been engaged in a delicate effort to stabilize industries and foster productivity, while inviting “overt intrusion of the state” into management of the labor-capital relation.¹⁶ Many unions empowered their leadership to facilitate coordination with management, opening a gulf between rank-and-file demands and the perspectives at the top. Yet these efforts were insufficient amid a global economic crisis of Fordism that revealed the limits of Keynesian policy instruments. A nationally based workers’ movement was no match for the transnationalization of capital. Austerity oriented demands from both voters and International Monetary Fund technocrats grew in tandem with unemployment rates, often affecting the very same young workers who might otherwise have been part of rank-and-file movements.

Beyond fascist appeals by rock stars like Clapton and David Bowie, numerous marches and local electoral wins testified to growing support for the National Front, as did a scourge of racist attacks across Britain. The Front expanded its membership throughout the 1970s, even recruiting some former leftists. Its ideological development was uneven, as members and leaders wavered on how firmly to embrace Nazism or Nazi imagery. On the one hand, the effort to gain respectability and with it to win elections called for distancing the party from its flirtations with

Rock magazine and Bob Marley albums alike.) RAR also supported the fight to decolonize Northern Ireland; Rachel, *Walls Come Tumbling Down*, 154–60.

19. Huddle and Saunders, *Reminiscences of RAR*.

20. Renton, *Never Again*, 162, 56–57, 169–71.

21. Goodyer, *Crisis Music*, 58.

22. Reynolds, *Rip It Up*; Sabin, “I Won’t Let That Dago By”; Frith and Street, “Rock Against Racism and Red Wedge”; Savage, *England’s Dreaming*. Savage criticizes RAR from an ultra-left perspective, claiming that it attempted to “codify” and homogenize what could otherwise have been more radical and anarchic (*England’s Dreaming*, 484). A more recent collection that attempts to reconsider punk and race, touching on RAR, is Duncombe and Tremblay, *White Riot*; but see Nikpour, “White Riot: Another Failure.”

23. Renton credulously accepts National Front claims about the number of punk bands under its wing. Not investigating these bands more closely represents a missed opportunity to rebut the widespread argument that punk was indifferent to antiracist politics or susceptible to the Front. A misspelling of the band name Beyond The Implode appears in both Renton’s books, based on an article in an antiracist magazine repeating Front reports claiming the band as its own (*When We Touched the Sky*, 158–59; *Never Again*, 121–22). Not just a gaffe, the claim was untrue. The band was unaware of the Front’s claim and had even broken off a relationship with an old friend who joined the British National Party at the time. Lyrics to one of the band’s songs, cataloging “midnight adventures,” mention fascists, in an observational tone, which an eagle-eyed Front member must have taken as an endorsement. See Forbes and Stampton, *White Nationalist Skinhead Movement*, 21–22; *Searchlight*, “Head-Banging for Hitler.”

24. Author interviews with Pervez Bilgrami (2011) and Ausaf Abbas (2008), in author’s possession.

25. See Savage, *England’s Dreaming*, 484.

26. Rachel, *Walls Come Tumbling Down*, 145–54.

27. I have explored this line of analysis in Schrader, “Rotten Legacy?”; Schrader, “Fiendens Musik”; Schrader, “I Don’t Wanna Be a Mercenary”; and Schrader, “New Wave vs. Black Lung?!”

28. In turn, “Punk’s narrowed focus on guitar, bass, and drums had filled British junkshops with banged-up horns, reeds, violins, accordions, harmonicas, and more exotic noisemaking gear that graced innumerable DIY disks with gleeful disregard for what was or was not cool” (Warner, “Messthetics #103”).

29. The most astringent critiques along these lines were Sabin, “I Won’t Let That Dago By,” and Frith and Street, “Rock Against Racism and Red Wedge.” The latter two authors suggested, in a quotation that represents the evidentiary

Notes

1. Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 460.
2. Thompson, “Agenda for a Radical History,” 362.
3. Goodyer, *Crisis Music*, 106, 157.
4. Goodyer, *Crisis Music*, 110.
5. Renton, *Never Again*, 90.
6. The most well-known analysis is Gilroy, “*There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack*.”
7. The largest and most important archive, belonging to Red Saunders, was destroyed in a fire, severely limiting the possibilities for further historical research on the internal organization of RAR.
8. Rachel, *Walls Come Tumbling Down*, 31.
9. Quoted in Renton, *When We Touched the Sky*, 121.
10. Renton, *When We Touched the Sky. Never Again* replicates some of this prior book’s analysis, though it focuses more directly on RAR and the National Front (RAR was founded about a year before the Anti-Nazi League).
11. Gilroy, “Rebel Souls,” 25. For a sharp analysis that emphasizes how RAR echoed the politics of C. L. R. James (once a Trotskyist) but deemphasizes SWP, see Dawson, “Love Music Hate Racism.”
12. The Communist Party of Great Britain struggled on this point: Smith, “Are the Kids United?”
13. Goodyer, *Crisis Music*, 54–55.
14. Quoted in Goodyer, *Crisis Music*, 61, and Renton, *Never Again*, 52. Saunders and his comrades had already been planning to create RAR before Clapton’s outburst.
15. Callinicos, “Fire This Time.”
16. Goodyer, *Crisis Music*, 54, 56.
17. Renton, *Never Again*, 88.
18. RAR’s peak coincided with Rhodesia’s dissolution, but RAR produced a sticker that declared “Rock Against Racism Zimbabwe Coming Soon!” (A Sex Pistols single was released in Rhodesia in 1977, but Rhodesia came to ban *Punk*

Hitler. On the other hand, it was the nasty imagery and language that seemed to attract new supporters. Fascist imagery disenchanted some older party members who recalled World War II vividly, but it was an aphrodisiac to street hooligans. The National Front by 1977 had grown three times as large as the SWP, and its “supporters were predominantly male, relatively young and unafraid of using violence.”¹⁷ The destruction in the 1970s of some vestiges of the British empire gave fodder to the Front. Campaigns denouncing political transformations in Rhodesia as well as the arrival of migrants from Kenya, Malawi, and Uganda pulled in supporters.¹⁸ The Front tried to organize among workers too, offering support for efforts to strengthen racialized wage hierarchies and sending white strikebreakers when Asian workers walked off the job. But the Front’s primary activities outside its electoral campaigns consisted of provocative marches that often ended in street violence. Under cover of night, there were also bombings of both left-wing and Asian and Black sites, as well as constant daubing of racist graffiti. Although some of the Front’s leadership tried to steer the party away from violence, the effort was futile. Meanwhile groups like Rock Against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League amplified any Front linkage to outright Nazism that could be found, stymied Front marches and rallies, and tried to push racists out of trade unions.

Rock Against Racism helped weaken, discredit, and fragment the National Front in three ways. First, RAR staged hugely successful protests and concerts in London and elsewhere in Britain. The size of these events far outmatched even the largest National Front rallies. Second, RAR gave prominent voice to antiracist politics at a time when the Tories were moving right, racist street violence was spiking, and mainstream musicians were openly expressing racist sentiments. By insisting both that the Front was extreme and that it was continuous with a long history of imperialist racism, RAR provided a new antiracist language to many whom socialists and other left-wing activists otherwise may not have reached. RAR fostered interracial solidarity and organizing. Third, RAR gave tangible resources, bodies in number, and spiritual courage to the fight for self-defense against both right-wing mobilizations and physical violence, including by police. These efforts were not always successful, to be sure, and they necessarily relied on coalition with those who did not need RAR’s exhortations to galvanize them to fight for their lives against neo-Nazis, whether the Indian Workers’ Association or the predominantly West Indian group Peoples Unite.¹⁹

Rock Against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League did defeat the National Front as such. The 1979 elections, meant to be pivotal for the Front, marked a resounding loss in support, causing the party’s leadership

to splinter. Although the party's membership declined by nine-tenths by 1985 and electoral wins became elusive, racist street violence continued, with fifteen thousand attacks officially recorded annually. Moreover, Margaret Thatcher and the Tories adopted much of the Front's program regarding immigration. Renton points out how RAR linked the growth of right-wing street violence to racist policing and to the state's nationalism more broadly, including its ongoing disavowal of the violence of imperialism. In this way, contrary to some conservative claims, Thatcher did not neutralize the Front, which RAR and the League had already weakened, but instead laundered its ideas and integrated them with widely shared racial discourses.²⁰

For its part, the Socialist Workers Party had theorized that deepening everyday discontent and the fracturing of a socioeconomic consensus were opening the door for neofascist political organizing. The SWP believed that if the party's activists did not attempt to win people over to antiracist politics, the National Front might win them over to the opposite perspective. In advance of Rock Against Racism's creation, the SWP already was focusing on issues of race and gender in its agitprop. SWP and its predecessors published papers in Bengali (Pragati), Punjabi (Chingari), and Urdu (Chingari), plus magazines specifically dedicated to reaching women (Women's Voice) and Black people (Flame).²¹ The SWP promulgated a campaign to reverse growing unemployment, but changing conditions dictated a move toward reaching the already unemployed and hopeless, rather than focusing on the rank-and-file in unionized sectors—and even those workers faced an onslaught of neofascist appeals within their unions. Antiracists dedicated themselves to pushing these workers out. But macroeconomic trends were already achieving what badges, banners, and brawling could not.

Debating Rock Against Racism

A great deal of the preceding debate about the relationship of the Socialist Workers Party and Rock Against Racism to the punk explosion has been predicated on whether RAR represented an organic tendency within punk or was externally imposed on it. A subsidiary topic in this debate is whether RAR shot itself in the foot, so to speak, by trying to organize an antiracist movement through a cultural phenomenon that was, at best, uninterested in antiracism, and at worst, incipiently or quietly racist. The books under review, particularly Goodyer's, which deals extensively with the existing literature on RAR, indicate that authors such as Simon Reynolds, Roger Sabin, and Simon Frith and John Street missed the mark.²² For every claim that punk was predominantly white, or that it was replete with racists, or that RAR did not reach the correct audiences, or that the SWP was parasitic and used the

With the large amount of source material now available in the books edited by Rachel and by Roger Huddle and Red Saunders, plus the scholarly histories by Goodyer and Renton, misleading accounts of Rock Against Racism should finally be put to rest. At the same time, Goodyer helps to indicate why an internalist history of phenomena like RAR or punk itself will no longer suffice. Renton concludes his analysis by arguing that it is unlikely there will be "any return to the anti-fascism of the 1970s, with its youth, its skepticism of authority and its physical daring, without their prerequisite: an independent cultural movement following its own rules."³¹ He is correct. I would add that the possibility of such an independent cultural movement was itself historically specific, fostered but not determined by a crisis of capitalism that augured the culmination of a particular regime of accumulation. That regime and its crisis will not be replicated. Saying "never again" to the birth of fascism requires also recognizing that the period of Fordism-Keynesianism that followed it will never happen again either. Fascism and its resistance today will have different proximate enabling conditions. That should be the basic lesson of a radical history. The tougher lesson is that, as in punk rock, there are no spectators in history, only participants, including historians themselves.

Stuart Schrader is associate director of the Program in Racism, Immigration, and Citizenship and lecturer at Johns Hopkins University. He is the author of Badges without Borders: How Global Counterinsurgency Transformed American Policing (2019). He has been writing about punk and other music in fanzines for twenty-five years, and he edits shit-fi.com.

nosed realism. The critics' rejection of the new type of militancy that punk represented cannot be explained within the critics' own terms because they were allergic to reflexivity about shared conditions for critique and its object alike.

Scholarly attacks on Rock Against Racism's and punk's shortcomings were themselves part of a broader rejection of collective action that was not market optimizing (whether on the shop floor or in the domain of culture). Claims that punk was too exclusionary, insufficiently solidaristic, or incompletely indigenous to the interracial working class ultimately come across as bad-faith dismissals of a unique effort to fashion a political riposte out of a new form of social collectivity once older forms proved incapable of withstanding the onslaught of capitalist crisis and the political arrival of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. Further, critics mistakenly took punk's political volatility as a drawback rather than recognizing, as did Rock Against Racism and many punks unaffiliated with it, that punk, like other cultural phenomena, was a strategic terrain for political battle. To imply that RAR failed to transform politics more broadly because punk was predisposed to accept far-right pleading is empirically incorrect and theoretically wooden. Ultimately, the Left in the United States and the United Kingdom was on its heels by the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s. Apart from a few notable exceptions, the mass movement that the older Marxist Left desired did not take the forms it would have likely recognized, but many anti-Marxist critics also misrecognized what was happening. This mass movement took on new contours, outside workplaces, mixing horizontal networking with entrepreneurialism in production and circulation, earning the label "DIY" but perhaps better considered rank and file, without either bosses or union stewards.

Reconstruction of left-wing strategic decisions is painstaking historical work, and criticism of political strategy for the purpose of refining it is important. Yet that is not what most critics of RAR sought. They ricocheted between voluntarism and cynicism—in retrospect, in accordance with neoliberal ideology itself. Critics blamed the victim while also upbraiding it for not achieving the impossible given the circumstances: thanks to the SWP's ideological proclivities, RAR failed because it did not entirely desegregate a music industry that had been segregated since its inception, et cetera. When attempts to replicate RAR occurred in subsequent decades, their failure should have been predictable, but existing analyses made them difficult to explain. If the SWP were the problem, then without the SWP, they should have succeeded. If punk was the problem, then without punk, they should have succeeded. But the problem was the conjuncture.

inauthentic RAR as a Trojan horse (perhaps the most common critique), there is a photograph by Syd Shelton showing interracial groups of punks wearing RAR badges, dancing together, or chasing neo-Nazis down the street.²³



RAR attendees enjoying *The Specials* in Leeds, Syd Shelton 1981

The focus of both Goodyer and Renton on London, Rock Against Racism's epicenter, and on the first few years of the organization, however, precludes assessment of its wider effects, while weakening possible rebuttals to existing criticisms. For instance, RAR's central committee diversified after the first couple of years, when two members of Alien Kulture, both Asian, were elected to it.²⁴ Further, there were over a hundred local RAR branches, plus autonomous subcultural initiatives of organic antiracism. The synergies between DIY punk's spread to the hinterlands of Britain and RAR's organizational infrastructure remain to be elucidated.²⁵ Renton briefly analyzes Rock Against Sexism, formed by some of RAR's key members, and Daniel Rachel's volume includes a fascinating discussion of how RAR promoted opposition to homophobia.²⁶ Numerous offshoots and related campaigns emerged as well, including Rock Against Racism outfits in several other countries: Rock Against Reagan (US), Rock Against Sexism (Sweden), Rock Against Prisons (Canada), Rock Against Police (France), Rock Against Religion (Netherlands), and others. Although RAR's founders grew tired of these spin-offs, believing the diluted the core

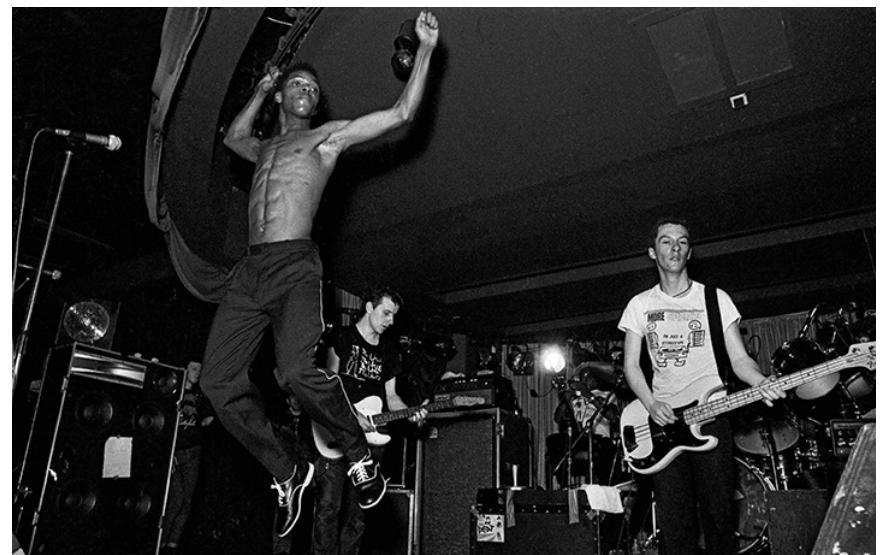
antiracist message and mission, their popularity indicates that a deeper investigation is warranted. What can they tell us about the Left at the moment the workers' movement was crumbling?

Punk and the 1970s Crisis of Capitalism

Long absent from any historical accounting of the punk explosion is an answer to the most basic question about it: Why did it happen when it happened? Why did punk grab hold of urban and suburban youth in the United Kingdom and United States around 1977, and within months, spread across Europe and across the globe to Japan, Mexico, Australia, and other places, though the components of its sound had been available for years? To answer these questions might require looking at and listening to punk more closely than these books allow, focused as they are on Rock Against Racism. But Goodyer's analysis of the socioeconomic conjuncture that gave birth to RAR, highlighting rank-and-file militancy, which reached far beyond the Socialist Workers Party, can help explain punk itself.

Punk was a rank-and-file movement. It was an autonomous explosion from below of political and cultural energy that expressed and took advantage of the foreclosure of more traditional forms of radical militancy wrought by changes in capitalism, exhaustion of extant left-wing organizations, and transformations in political common sense that are widely now associated with neoliberalization.²⁷ As deindustrialization, offshoring, financialization, and the expansion of the service sector hollowed out communities once bound together by work, music offered new communalisms. Precisely when institutional and overtly political avenues of struggle were becoming foreclosed, the domain of culture, which had always been a site of political contestation, became the primary site. In the 1977 words of The Desperate Bicycles, "The medium was tedium, the outlets were clogged / The rats were fighting cats again and everyone was stuck." It was not simply that militants turned to music; it was that music was one of the few arenas of struggle that seemed readily available as the institutional Left was in retreat and other organizing methods became exhausted. The rise of punk rock, with all of its political confusions and its contradictory nihilistic romanticism, evidenced the turn away from prior forms of working-class organization toward other modalities of struggle. Yet even as punk represented an extension or culmination of the revolt against Fordism that the New Left and the global revolution of 1968 began, punk risked the replacement of Fordism's stultifying mass cultural and economic seriality with post-Fordism's marketized, individualistic, and consumer-based freedom. Organizations like Rock Against Racism tried to channel punk's energy and prevent this outcome.

Further, the punk explosion was an explosion of broader cultural ferment that mostly took shape through music but generally represented a type of autogestion. Its sound was not only the sound of punk rock and reggae but also that of punk adjacent "UK DIY," second-wave ska, the "new wave of British heavy metal," industrial, and, of course, rap (first in the United States). The extent and reach of this wave indicates that it had deep, impersonal causes. Punk and rap most directly sought to adequate themselves to a postindustrial economic situation of endless deskilling and unemployment, while reappropriating obsolescent technologies.²⁸ It is plausible to impugn punk as too white or too middle-class only if analyzed narrowly in time and space and divorced from these sibling cultural phenomena that occurred at the same time.²⁹



The Beat performing at RAR, Syd Shelton

Historians now understand their field's turn to culture itself, along with the fetish of agency, as consonant with transformations in capitalism that commenced in the 1970s. Although not all scholarly critics of Rock Against Racism and punk were historians, they participated in what William H. Sewell Jr. has called "a culture mania" that "swept across a broad range of fields in the human sciences." This mania transformed social history's focus on agency as experience into agency as freely willed activity, as if the ordinary people who engaged in these movements could have done simply anything they wanted, untethered from historical circumstance.³⁰ Advancing a structural interpretation of the conditions of possibility for cultural phenomena was never the goal of criticisms of Rock Against Racism or punk, which often cherry-picked texts to suit prefabricated interpretations that masqueraded as hard-