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**Il sistema penale minorile alla
prova del populismo penale**

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N. 2/2023 Il sistema penale minorile alla prova del populismo penale

a cura di Vincenzo Scalia

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NO FUTURE – 1970S CULTURE WARS

*Matt Clement**

Abstract

Britain's cultural revolution began 50 years ago in 1976. The capital's Metropolitan Police Force had declared that black youth were the vanguard of the criminal classes, feeding both moral panic and also a powerful subcultural reaction from those labelled the new folk devils by the media and politicians. Linton Kwesi Johnson's poem All we doin is defendin featured on his groundbreaking album Dread, Beat and Blood, making the case for the right to self-defence which was then realised in the explosion of black youth counter-rioting against the violence of the police at the Notting Hill Carnival that year. This was characterised as an uprising against the forces of Babylon – a movement from below 'punching up' at their oppressors. White youth also celebrated and venerated this activism as The Clash released the song White Riot whose chorus declared I wanna riot of my own. From then on the youth subcultures of punk and reggae became major forces in a multicultural mashup of resistance to authority and new musical manifestos springing out of the grass roots of the inner cities and council estates of the UK.

Keywords: Subcultures, moral panics, Rastafarianism, social movements, crisis.

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1. Introduction

The late 1970s were years of crisis in Britain. The global slump began in 1973 and its result was to be the usual mixture of austerity, inflation of living costs combined with shrinking profit rates that drove economising of pay rates, job cuts and closures across industry; often in areas that became labelled as declining, precarious and crime-ridden, whilst demonising those who live there as the malign forces bringing in all these unwanted changes to what was an ‘established’ area. This phenomenon is endemic to capitalism – the booms and slumps affect decisions made by corporations and governments. They will always describe cut-backs they initiate as necessary bouts of austerity, required to allow the market-based system to recover from any slump by allegedly balancing its books through economising on the quality of employment and services they offer to their workers and consumers. This economic offensive on peoples living standards can of course be exacerbated by factors such as inflation driving up prices and thereby shrinking wages and benefits still further. In 1973 this was already happening as a result of a massive hike in the cost of oil following on from the Arab-Israeli conflict and the determination of gulf state leaders to maintain more of the profits at the cost of the multinational western oil companies. All of these factors ushered in an era which had the appearance of a crisis - especially in comparison to the years of the long economic boom of the 1950s and 1960s.

How this crisis played out over the course of the 1970s is of course the vital background to this story. Because I am contending that the austerity and authoritarianism, including the institutional racism was not necessary, but deliberately manufactured to justify itself I am calling these events a form of ‘moral panic’ – a term popularised in the 1970s to describe the sensational reactions that tend to accompany the emergence of these so-called deviant youth subcultures. The origin of the term is generally associated with Stan Cohen’s book *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The creation of the Mods and the Rockers*, which he defines as: «In the gallery of types that society erects to show its members which roles should be avoided and which should be emulated, these groups have occupied a constant position as folk devils: visible reminders of what we should not be» (Cohen, 2011, 2). Who were the folk devils of this time?

Cohen concludes his introduction claiming that ‘cognition is socially controlled...That is why moral panics are condensed political struggles to control the means of cultural reproduction.’ (Cohen, 2011, xiiv) In one of the fullest treatments of the folk devil and moral panic phenomenon, Stuart Hall and his colleagues at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at Birmingham University wrote 1978’s *Policing the Crisis*, which describes a process where the police, politicians and the media conspired to create a distorted racialised image of the ‘black mugger’ folk devil. As Hall

described its origin, it is clear that this was a study emerging not from the Centre itself, but from real events in Birmingham from the perspective of activists who were concerned about growing racism and its consequences. In a later interview, he explained:

«the reason it takes that particular form is because the impetus comes from outside – not from within the Centre at all. It comes from the fact that a lot of Centre people were involved in anti-racist youth groups and community groups in Birmingham. Charles Critcher [one of the contributors] ran, lived in, and was very active on the ground with young people and with social problems and with racial discrimination in the Handsworth area. And he came to us one day and said “D’you know what’s happened? Three boys, all of them from different cultural backgrounds, were involved in a small-scale crime. They saw a man, a drunk man coming out of a pub and attacked him. They wanted money. They got a very small amount of money, and they beat him up a bit.” So they were coming to court at the moment where what I described earlier as the moral panic, was ratcheting itself up, and this was called “The first mugging”, or “one of the early muggings”. OK, then well it entered a different empire altogether and the boys were given twenty years each. Twenty Years! Well what is that?

That’s not just a societal reaction to crime, that is a moral panic. That is people feeding into the legal process their fears, anxieties, nameless folk devils. Their feelings about race, their feelings about poverty, their feelings about people intruding into our neighbourhood, all these things were what produced, in the law, a kind of response which said “This mustn’t go on. We must stop this in its tracks”. So, that’s where it came from. We said “well, we should look into it”. So we started doing some *ad hoc research*, into the boys, into the event, and then into the law. Asking ourselves questions like “What did the judge say. Why did he give him 20 years. How was it

reported in the press?” In other words, how was this single event constructed, through social meaning, into a much larger phenomenon? How did it connect with the anxieties of the society, underlying anxieties of the society? Remember, this is a particular period where Birmingham is transfixed by the emergence of immigration, the impact of immigration.

But everybody was aware of it, we were going on anti-racist marches, it was a live political theme in the Centre. Not many of us would have been close to a particular community like Charles Critcher. He brought us the news, but only because people were receptive to this, they were watching all the events that were going on in Birmingham, from the time of the Enoch Powell “rivers of blood” speech onwards. At places, there was an anti-racist demonstration every week. The place was alert with questions, for the first time, about race and class, and race and equality, and city deprivation and in deprivation the relationship of crime to those questions. So there’s a fertile ground, receptive ground, for someone who says, “I’ve got an example of what you’re talking about. Yeah, it’s just happened in Handsworth» (Hall, 2012).

It wasn’t difficult to find more examples of how the moral panic was playing out. Mr Justice Caulfield’s summing up in Leicester Crown Court stated; ‘the newspapers have made it known that sentences for attacks on the open highway will no longer be light’ - to illustrate how all the parties involved are complicit in inflating the moral panic. (CCCS, 1976, 76). Highly dubious statistics alleged this folk devil to be the new public enemy, manufacturing an unjustified fear of crime. Such distortions fuelled the growth of racism, and openly racist organisations like the British National Front capitalised on the greater traction this institutionally racist

offensive created amongst sections of the majority white population. Panics by their nature are short-term – usually: but Stan Cohen explained there were exceptions: «Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten, except in folklore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and it might produce such changes in legal and social policy or even the way society conceives itself» (Cohen, 2011, 1). The demonization of black youth through the mugging moral panic manufactured an image of a largely fictional ‘crime wave’ centred on the inner cities. This, in turn, was the justification for an increasingly authoritarian style of policing, prompted by the associated public ‘fear of crime’ generated by the institutions responsible for sending messages to the public via the media, the courts and policy statements. (Cohen and Young, 1981).

In May 1975, the *Daily Mail* reported the summing up of Judge Gwynn Morris as he sentenced five black youths to five years in jail, describing two south London inner-city areas Clapham and Brixton thus:

«Within memory these areas were peaceful, safe and agreeable to live in. But the immigrant resettlement which has occurred over the past twenty-five years has radically transformed that environment. Those concerned with the maintenance of law and order are confronted with immense difficulties. This case has highlighted and underlined the perils which confront honest, innocent and hardworking, unaccompanied women who are in the street after nightfall. I notice not a single West Indian woman was attacked» (Hall *et al.*, 1978, 333).

For the judge, these once ‘peaceful, safe and agreeable’ areas had been tarnished by the presence of black people who he alleges were making life difficult for the police and white women. This is a classic example of the institutionalised racism present within the criminal justice system which unjustly persecutes those it stigmatises. Later that year the National Front (NF) organised a march against what they called ‘black muggings’, whilst in the same month Judge Morris claimed to have received ‘hundreds of letters’ from ‘petrified’ women and suggested perhaps ‘some form or other of vigilante corps ... would become necessary’ (Hall *et al.*, 1978, 333, 337). A new spectre was thus thrown up – the folk devil of the ‘black mugger’. As Hall put it, «the three themes subtly intertwined in the earlier treatment of “mugging” were now fused into a single theme: crime, race and the ghetto» (Hall *et al.*, 1978, 329). The message was clear, «the coupling of “social control” and “social-problem” perspectives appears to be flowing from highly contradictory forces within the urban race problem, as it is intensified and pressured by the crisis» (Hall *et al.*, 1978, 333). This explains how the rebellion initiated by black youth was a reaction to these stigmatising processes: (Clement and Scalia, 2016, 165).

«It is in the modality of race that those whom the structures systematically exploit, exclude and subordinate discover themselves as an exploited, excluded and subordinated class. Thus it is primarily in and through the modality of race that resistance, opposition and rebellion first expresses itself» (Hall *et al.*, 1978, 347).

In 1976, the CCCS published *Resistance through Rituals* (RTR) (Clarke *et al.*, 1976) – in many ways a parallel volume to *Policing the Crisis* (PTC) – which came out two years later: RTR investigated British youth subcultures in the thirty years since World War Two, clearly building on Stan Cohen's earlier exploration 'Folk Devils and Moral Panics'. The youth subcultures known as Mods, Rockers, skinheads and Rastafarians were new cultural phenomena from the 1960s and '70s in their chapter headings - And punk was just arriving on the scene that year. It was a combination of these 'outsiders' stigmatised position within the social hierarchy – created by the 'established' classes' fear of so-called deviant groups - that created the media storms which in turn solidified and defined the stereotyped image of these 'folk devils' (Becker, 1963; Elias and Scotson, 2007). However, the CCCS was about celebrating the subversive power of subcultures as well as explaining how establishment moral panics labelled these groups as a deviant other. The late 1970s certainly felt full of the atmosphere of protest and rebellion. Besides the rising tide of anti-racism described above, 1976 was also the year of rising fears as the government appeared to lose control of the economy: Sterling collapsed on the money markets and the International Monetary Fund dictated terms for their bail out loan. The UK's traditional conservative culture of complacency was under threat. Even the weather seemed harsh and unpredictable that summer. As chronicled in

'Subculture: The meaning of style' by CCCS contributor Dick Hebdige:

«It was during this strange apocalyptic summer that punk made its sensational debut in the music press...punk claimed a dubious parentage. Strands from David Bowie and glitter-rock were woven together with elements from American proto-punk (the Ramones...Iggy Pop) ...inspired by the mod subculture of the 60s ...from northern soul and from reggae» (Hebdige, 1979, 24).

Reggae, punk and ska music were all subversive and revolting youth subcultures, many with overtly political and protest-focused themes that reflected the atmosphere of crisis in creative and inspiring ways Besides the various youth subcultures that were associated with music and other 'styles' that mark identity, there were all the hybrid forms and figurations linked to 'resistance' such as anti-racism expressed as movements of people assembling on the streets and at carnivals to celebrate their culture, and resist fascist and racist mobilisations. For Garrison, «Such is the turning point in attitude of the younger black generation, who increasingly reject all forms of symbols of white domination. A confrontation between the black youths and the British Police at a West Indian Carnival in the suburbs of London at the end of August 1976, brought a serious outburst of violence. Such an experience showed a new kind of defiance and urban resistance against established authority» (Garrison, 1979, 35). Although the spark that caused the Notting Hill uprising was organised police violence, it was a transformative moment as black youth fought back collectively and celebrated

their power on the streets. Paul Gilroy recalls:

«[T]hat riotous crowd, mindful of what had been going on in the embattled schools of apartheid South Africa, began to chant “Soweto, Soweto” at London’s bewildered and defeated police force.’ Adding ‘Youth’s battle to be free from “shit work” was affirmed in the unruly, dissident (sub)culture that they improvised from the residuals of insurgent Ethiopianism, Black Power, and democratic anti-racist sentiment» (Gilroy, 2013, 552).

It was the institution tasked by the government to maintain control over the capital, London’s Metropolitan Police (the Met) that took the initiative. In a memo to the parliamentary *Select Committee on Race Relation and Immigration* in March 1976 they stressed: «already our experience has taught us the fallibility of the assertion that crime rates amongst those of West Indian origin are no higher than those of the population at large». The Met had discovered that the rising wave of crime that they were responsible for measuring in the course of their duties was disproportionately located in one particular group, described in the same passage as ‘West-Indian type persons both over and under 17 when compared to the rest of the population’.

A crucial aspect of the story of policing in the 1970s and 1980s is the evolution of squads of officers with a focus on controlling the public rather than being ‘on the beat’ in a defined locality. The Metropolitan Police Special Patrol Group (SPG), formed in 1965 as a mobile reserve, developed a paramilitary

role in dealing with public order and terrorism.

The SPG carried out 18, 907 stop searches in the greater London area in 1975, some 14,000 of which took place in Lambeth and Lewisham over a two-month period and resulted in 403 arrests. Of the 5,000 or so stop and search incidents in the rest of the Metropolitan area, some 3,700 resulted in arrests (Rollo, 1980, 189-192). The implication is obvious: «In other parts of London, the police degree of ‘suspicion’ was credible enough for them to be able to arrest the bulk of those stopped, but in ‘black’ areas those 14,000 people were overwhelmingly harassed not because the police had cause, but *despite* the fact that they had none» (Clement, 2025).

The police riot was the *modus operandi* in August 1976 at Notting Hill Carnival. The police were used to employing repressive tactics at this annual event, stopping and searching and intensive patrolling due to their cultural intolerance towards the free expression of Caribbean culture on the streets of ‘their’ city. Taking their cue from the new police manifesto that declared black people to comprise their chief crime threat, their operation at Notting Hill was famously described as a ‘police carnival’ by Darcus Howe:

«Along Pembridge Road, into Chepstow and left into Westbourne Park, there are policeman everywhere. [Howe’s steel band] *Ebony* is turning into Lancaster Road still chaperoned by forty-odd, uniformed policemen. They are definitely not looking

for pickpockets; they have come expecting a confrontation. The bands are chaperoned along a defined route, forty policemen to a band. Along that route vanloads of policemen are strategically placed. At the first sign of trouble, the forty officers form a cordon, a long line across the street. At the other end, reinforcements are called in and the crowd is sandwiched between two lines of police officers. It is a military strategy to defeat a hostile rebellion» (Howe, 2020, 106).

The Notting Hill Carnival had grown in size every year since it was first staged in 1965. By the 1970s it was Europe's largest street festival with all the traditional carnival associations with entertainment and revelry. It still attracts negative media attention even in the 2020s as institutional racism ensures that this black-led event garners very different publicity to more white middle class festivals such as Glastonbury. The vast numbers attending Notting Hill remind society how large and multicultural is British society. The police have always viewed the event with suspicion and in 1976, according to Gary McFarlane:

«1,600 officers were mobilised for the clampdown. By the third day of the carnival at around 5pm the police made one arbitrary arrest too many. The youth turned on them and fought back in what turned out to be the biggest explosion of civil unrest seen in mainland Britain since the Battle of Cable Street that drove Mosley's Blackshirts off the streets of east London in 1936. The zone of insurrection spread to encompass the area round Ladbroke Grove and fighting with the police went on well into the night. Over 300 police officers were injured and 35 police vehicles damaged or destroyed... They had no riot equipment and were unable to reply effectively to the constant fusillade of rubble raining down

on their heads and vehicles» (McFarlane, 2013, kindle loc, 1310).

It was an uprising, labelled in the press the Notting Hill carnival riot; the police were successfully resisted, and the crowd celebrated their new confidence and exuberance at having faced down their oppressors. Was this the moment that working class youth cultures started to move beyond the symbolism of music and identity and towards embracing opposition to the capitalist system? We had witnessed something of this spirit in the late 1960s, especially in the US where anti-war and pro-civil rights themes had featured in some material from Motown artists such as Marvin Gaye and Martha and the Vandellas, as well as the psychedelic and Hippy subcultures that had spawned The Doors, Jimi Hendix, Crosby, Stills Nash and Young and many more. As Peter Gabriel put it, «Rock music was the dominant force in the cultural revolution of the 1960s» (Gabriel, 2023). Of course, this claim could ably be contested by blues and soul music both of which shaped popular music fundamentally in these years. The subcultural style of some of the punks certainly empathised with this spirit of revolt, but by the mid-1970s this included revolting against the new "dinosaurs" of rock such as Led Zeppelin, Yes and Genesis.

«Punk sought a relevant, urgent alternative to "the bollocks" on the radio, something that reflected their generation's experiences and something that could be said in a three-minute song, using *only* three chords... what defined punk was not so much what it *was* but more of what it *wasn't*. It wasn't long hair,

it wasn't flares and it wasn't "fashion." Hair was short and spiky; the trousers were straight and the clothes were the antithesis of the High Street» (Blackman, 2021, 121-122).

One powerful ingredient in this whole process was epitomised by the words of Eric Clapton, the popular blues guitarist who delivered a drunken racist tirade at a concert in Birmingham on 5th August 1976, barely three weeks before Notting Hill's explosion of resistance. He shouted for 'foreigners' to «just leave. Not just leave the hall, leave our country...Stop Britain from becoming a black colony...Keep Britain white. I used to be into dope, now I'm into racism» (Blackman, 2021, 117-118). This outburst was accompanied by calls to 'vote for Enoch' and more 'Keep Britain white' slogans that shocked Clapton's audience. Two activist artists, photographer Red Saunders and illustrator Roger Huddle sent in a letter to the weekly music magazine 'Melody Maker' which was a call to organise against racism:

«What's going on Eric? You've got a touch of brain damage...Own up. Half your music is black. You're rock music's biggest colonist...You've got to fight the racist poison, otherwise you degenerate into the sewer...We want to organise a rank and file movement against the racist poison in rock music – we urge support – all those interested please write to:

Rock Against Racism

Box M8, Cotton's Gardens

London E2 8DN

p.s. 'Who shot the sheriff?' Eric. It sure as hell wasn't you!» (Blackman, 2021, 118-119).

The Clash's *White Riot* wanted white youth to take a leaf out of the book of their black compatriots, stating a crying need for what the Sex Pistols called *Anarchy in the UK*, whilst on the traditional side of society the violent racism of the National Front was winning votes and called for a militant anti-racist response: Saunders' and Huddle's appeal chimed with this mood and hundreds wrote in to help build this anti-racist social movement. These youth subcultures all came together in Rock Against Racism and its political expression, the Anti Nazi League, a series of carnivals were hosted under these labels including over 100 000 in Brixton's Brockwell Park in September 1978. Bob Marley's 1977 hit, *Punky Reggae Party* celebrated the shared outlook of black and white youth towards their oppression.

Paul Gilroy celebrated the advent of multicultural Britain:

«[A]spects of the organic relationship between blacks and whites which has developed, unevenly, over a considerable period of time in the leisure institutions of urban Britain...As black styles, music, dress, dance, fashion and languages became a determining force shaping the style, music, dress, fashion and language of urban Britain as a whole...its significance is essential for the development of anti-racism in general. Black expressive cultures affirm while they protest» (Gilroy, 2002, 203-204).

Writing on *Rioting* in 1981, sociologist of deviance Paul Rock summed up the youth subculture debate as «yet another cycle of expressive deviance which will pass. Teddy Boys, Spivs, Cosh Boys, Mods, Rockers and others have appeared, disappeared and

reappeared in a long procession of deviant types», concluding «Selves, appearances and postures are actually more lightly assumed than their adult observers believe» (Rock, 1981). He is implying that during a moral panic these deviants are labelled by society and then accept the label, thus solidifying their identity, subsequently the power of the label will weaken as the moral panic subsides. His conclusion was that mainstream society creates these labels, but also that the subcultures so labelled will act out their resistance to the conformity of the dominant culture through their subcultural rituals and forms of expression. Their identity is shaped and reflected in the clothes, the language and above all the expressive form – the music which they make and relate to, its style and content reflect their social concerns. Earlier, the CCCS subculture theorists Tony Jefferson and John Clarke had painted a fuller picture of working class youth cultures that identified «three types of possible response – firstly ‘traditional delinquency’ defined as ‘petty thieving, vandalism, some fighting’; secondly the ‘mainstream’ or ‘incorporated version of the “deviant”, style ...sanitised, “made safe” and resold to the wider youth market: the “deviant” life style becomes “consumption” style: the commercial version of the real.’ Thirdly there is a more authentic “deviant style” where youth ‘assert a “moment” of originality in the formation of such a style...when we read the styles of the mods and skinheads.’ Even here they feel the need to qualify the degree of opposition to mainstream values, stating: “These styles, though

deviant, remain negotiated and not “oppositional” because they operate in only one area of life; the leisure area...a symbolic critique of the established order» (Clarke and Jefferson, 1973, 10).

Perhaps the most distinctive of the youth subcultures from this era were the skinheads. Originally the children of the declining industrial working class from the post-war world where jobs on the docks and in the factories were less available and they formed new identities to attempt the ‘magical recovery of community’ (Clarke *et al.*, 1976), including embracing Jamaican ska music with songs like the *Guns of Navarone* and the *Skinhead Moonstomp*. By the late 1970s though they had become disillusioned with punk as it evolved into the more commercial ‘new wave’ at the end of the decade. The look became more brutal as they moved to the right politically, rejecting the left-leaning style of the new ska-based ‘two tone’ movement associated with bands like the Specials, The Beat and The Selector:

«An increasingly militaristic style was adopted. Shoes and Sta-prest trousers were replaced by army issue boots and fatigues and jeans were cut high to display the top of exponentially rising [Doctor Marten] boots...The hair was no longer closely cropped but shorn completely and with this new look skinheads became disparagingly known as boneheads» (Blackman, 2021, 184).

2. Reggae and Dub: Jamaican Rebel Music

Brixton's foremost champion of what he called 'Jamaican rebel music' was Linton Kwesi Johnson (LKJ) who epitomised its importance in words and music:

«[I]t reflects, and in reflecting, reveals, the contemporary state of the nation...it is the *spiritual* expression of the *historical* experience of the Afro-Jamaican. In making the music, the musicians themselves enter a common stream of consciousness, and what they create is an invitation to the listeners to be entered into that consciousness...the burden of their history» (Johnson, 2023, 4).

This was certainly true for LKJ himself, who was born in Jamaica in 1953 and moved to Brixton in the early 1960s. Whilst studying Sociology at London Goldsmiths College he published his book of poems *Dread Beat and Blood* which were later to become his first album as a dub musician. One poem, *Bass Culture* describes how when the 'bad bass bounce' - your «blood leap an pulse a pounce, bass history is a moving/ is a hurting black story» (Johnson, 2023, 5). The reggae or dub subculture was vital to explaining the patterns of everyday life in Jamaica but was also carried by Afro-Caribbeans migrating to Britain «part of the wider Caribbean experience of colonialism and neo-colonialism...the violence of the people's existence persists like a naked light in a house full of dynamite» (Johnson, 2023, 11).

Whereas the moral panics affecting Britain's white youth subcultures were short-lived experiences that shifted with changes in

fashion for many participants, the black youth resisting arrest, skirmishing and marching against injustice in places like Brixton were facing long-term stigma conferred by a society determined to see these folk devils as a brand of hooligan, a cartoon stereotype conjured up by the fears of 'respectable society'. To the police, the politicians and the media these were the new 'dangerous classes', a term that had been around for centuries to describe variously 'the mob', the 'underclass' who may revolt at any time, thus attention turns to what measures the state will take to confront this 'social problem.' For those with a heritage linked to the Caribbean diaspora, their demonisation in the UK was a continuation of the lives of previous generations struggling to survive a colonial existence on their Caribbean small island. LKJ chronicles how the Jamaican struggles against slavery and exploitation by the British bred resistance – «a history characterized by slave uprisings and repression; riots and repression; betrayal, rebellion and repression» (Johnson, 2023, 15). The island's riots of 1938 began with an island-wide series of strikes by workers employed by Tate and Lyle, the British sugar-refining corporation and led to the creation of a Trade Union movement and the legalising of political parties and the right to vote which was granted in 1944. These occurred at the same time as their rulers and upper classes became fixated with the threat represented by the new protesting social movements of workers and the unemployed, and the cult of Rastafarianism.

Stuart Hall's memoir describes how the first Rastafarian community, The Pinnacle, was founded by Leonard Howell in 1940. «These scattered communities, where the Rastas with their locks spoke and “reasoned” in apocalyptic language based on a counter-reading of the Old Testament, began to appear in small numbers everywhere...Rastas were regarded by polite society as menacing excluded outcasts roaming the streets, begging...They smoked ganja which, it was said, turned their eyes red and drove them crazy...they came to be perceived as the most terrifying visible proof of the nameless poor black threat which pressed in on middle-class Jamaica» (Hall and Schwarz, 2016, 47-48). Rastafarianism tempted many rebels to see their situation as an apocalyptic struggle against the evil of 'Babylon' i.e. the money-worshipping society that degraded their existence. They retreated from this society, reasoned out their objections and spoke with what LKJ describes as a «lyricism which laments the human suffering...whose imagery is blood and fire, apocalyptic and dread – images that are really pictures of a brutal existence in the “land of Sodom and Gomorrah”. Songs of hope in suffering, songs of utter despair...songs that are as prophetic as they are true – such is the nature of the poetry of Jamaican music» (Johnson, 2023, 19).

For the Rasta, Jamaica itself was no solution to their problems. As a colonised country formed through slavery it represented oppression – an oppression that was not

resolved through independence as the country remained economically dominated by imperial powers. Therefore Jamaica also represented the problems associated with colonisation and attracted the term 'Babylon' to describe it using Rastafarian language. Dick Hebdige recounts:

«As the locksmen began to clash regularly with the police in the late 40's, a liaison developed between locksmen and hardened criminals. The dreadlocks of the Rastamen were absorbed into the arcane iconography of the outcast and many Rastas openly embraced the outlaw status which the authorities seemed determined to thrust upon them. Still more made permanent contacts in the Jamaican underworld whilst serving prison terms for ganja (cannabis) offences. This drift toward a consciously anti-social and anarchist position was assisted by the police who attempted to discredit the movement by labelling all locksmen as potentially dangerous criminals who were merely using mysticism as a front for their subversive activities. As has been observed so often elsewhere, predictions such as these have a tendency to find fulfilment» (Hebdige, 1976, 118).

Reggae emerged in Jamaica in the 1960s amidst the rising unemployment, strikes and police violence. Independence had come in 1962, but the Jamaican Labour Party government headed by Hugh Shearer was corrupt and repressive. LKJ notes how in 1968, Jamaica saw an uprising when the Guyanese Marxist historian Walter Rodney was banned from taking up a post at the University of the West Indies. 50 buses were overturned and burnt out, and 14 different fires started across Kingston. Walter Rodney himself said these 'Rodney riots' as they were known, were 'part of the whole social

malaise, that is revolutionary activity.’ Another song banned by the Shearer regime was Junior Byles, *Beat down Babylon* whose lyrics include «Oh what a wicked situation/ I an’ I starvin for salvation / this might cause a revolution / and a dangerous pollution’ from which LKJ concludes the song ‘immediately caught the imagination of sufferers in Jamaica and the brutalized black youth in Britain, for it was a song which sounded out their defiance and gave fire to their rebellious fervour» (Johnson, 2023, 16, 24). The Rasta culture migrated from the fields to the island’s urban slums, literally creating the ‘Trenchtown Rock’ of Marley and others. Reggae, according to another artist, Big Youth, is ‘the sounds of screeching tyres, bottles breaking, wailing sirens, gunfire, people screaming and shouting, children crying. They are the sounds of the apocalyptic thunder and earthquake of chaos and curfews. The sounds of reggae are the sounds of a society in the process of transformation (Johnson, 1976).

Of course, Britain, the original coloniser, was also anathema: The pains of a colony’s ‘underdevelopment – unemployment, corruption, crime and violence migration from the fields to the urban slums blighted Jamaica, Trinidad and the other West Indian islands. Therefore the British society to which so many Caribbeans migrated was also Babylon. Just as in Jamaica, the authorities made their situation impossible and unsustainable, driving them outside the law and

towards the association with crime, as Hebdige epitomises this trend:

«The crime and music of West Kingston were thus linked in a subtle and enduring symbiosis...The embittered youth of West Kingston, abandoned by the society which claimed to serve them, were ready to look to the locksman for explanations, to listen to his music, and to emulate his posture of withdrawal» (Hebdige, 1976, 120).

Only ‘blood and fire’ could save black people from its oppression. Garrison sees this as «a renewal process...an essential part of any people’s experience on the road to self-discovery...it produces disruption in the accepted norms and values, it is also helping to forge a new black self-image and secure identity...parental authority is seen as too compromising and conformist, and that maintained by the police as unjust and morally stifling» (Garrison, 1979, 35). Of course, not everyone agreed that this was a positive development. In his 1970s study of *West Indian life styles in Bristol* Caribbean sociologist Ken Pryce pointed out «relationships with elders enter a period of strain – over matters of late hours, choice of friends and entertainments, involvement with the law and repeated work failure...They regard the emerging disreputable orientation of their children as utterly irrational and quite definitely a disgrace...They react by rejecting them completely» (Pryce, 1979, 26). Doubtless Pryce saw examples of such family histories as he carried out his study into the subculture of St Paul’s in Bristol, but not all parents rejected or blamed their children; and all generations tended to heal their divisions in the face of

the greater enemy that was police and societal racism in ways that meant they stood together in the 1980s uprisings. The conformity of the first generation had been challenged by police violence against their children and this, combined with the greater expectations of the second generation meant they would not be prepared to accept permanent second-class status in the new Babylon. For Rick Blackman:

«The growth of the Black Power movement alongside the ongoing civil war in Jamaica and the rise of Rastafarianism saw rock steady superceded and reggae become an increasingly dominant *and* politicised music» (Blackman, 2021, 107).

The lyrical poetry on LKJ's albums translate the Jamaican experience into life in the British inner city. They describe the low wage economy that exploits: «Wen dem gi you di likkle wage packit/ Fus dem rub it wid dem big tax racket» (*Inglan is a Bitch*). In *Sonny's Lettab*, he describes the all-too familiar pattern of police harassment on the streets using the hated SUS law: «One a dem hol awn to Jim/seh him tekin him in...dem lik him pan him back/ and him rib get pap' climaxing when big brother Sonny's anger is so great he attacks and kills an officer. The form of the song – a letter from jail portrays the fate of the martyr for justice: 'dem charge Jim fi sus/ dem charge me fi murdah».

In *Song of Blood*, the overall climate of repression and resistance is laid bare: «there are robbers in the gullies on the streets/ there are wicked men sitting in the seat of judgement' Clearly the police are labelled as

the robbers – using their devious sus law to entrap black youth whilst the courts, the media and the politicians abuse their power. Judgement will fall upon this wicked society intones LKJ; 'there are sufferers with guns movin' breeze through the trees/ there are people waging war in the heat and hunger of the streets» (Johnson, 2008). These poetic images of revolt hunger for social justice. The electoral breakthrough by the fascist National Front party was pulling the opposition Tories further into openly racist anti-immigration tirades to prove their 'loyalty' to the voters. In July 1976, the month before the Notting Hill carnival MP John Stokes claimed «Great Britain had [not] won [World War Two] only to hand over parts of our territory to alien races» (Blackman, 2021, 113). Black youth and anti-racists were prepared to resist. Other songs, like *All we doin is defendin* are more direct still: «we will fite yu in di street wid we han/ wi hav a plan/ so lissen man/ get ready fi tek some blows'. LKJ spells out how police violence will be vanquished: 'doze days of di truncheon/ ... doze blow dat caused my heart to swell/ were well numbered/ and are now at an end...di Special Patrol will fall/ like a wall force down/ or a town turn to dus...all wi need is bakkles an bricks an sticks».

After the 1981 uprisings it was noted that songs like these had explained and predicted these UK riots. In this LKJ was the spokesperson for a rising 'second generation' who were becoming increasingly clear that they were fighting back to win the equal

opportunities to which they were entitled. In 1976 he wrote:

«[T]he oscillation between the psychic states of despair and rebellion does not necessarily oppose the quest for liberation. The historical phenomenon called Rastafarianism which is saturating the consciousness of the oppressed Jamaican – which represents a particular stage in the development of the consciousness of the oppressed – is in fact laying the spiritual and cultural foundations from which to launch a struggle for liberation.’ He quotes the world’s most famous rasta - Bob Marley – in words that neatly sum up the universality of the reggae message: ‘slave driver/ the table is turned/catch a fire/ you gonna get burned» (Johnson, 2023, 24).

The phenomenal success of Marley gained a worldwide audience for reggae in the 1970s and was, of course, a source of pride. Marley was literally a role model as he had been raised in a Rastafarian community in the slums of Trenchtown in Kingston Jamaica and saw it as his mission to spread the faith. LKJ recalls «For second – and third-generation young blacks in Britain, reggae music was an important factor in the formation of new identities of un/belonging. Reggae music, through sound systems, provided a nexus for a culture of resistance to racial oppression. So expression of African consciousness in the Jamaican reggae we socialized around were an important influence. It facilitated the growth of Rastafari in Britain» (Johnson, 2023, 84). Other bands formed in Britain creating their own music and lyrics that reflected the experience of ‘Babylon’ in Britain rather than Jamaica, the likes of Birmingham’s Steel Pulse, Misty in Roots from Southall, West London and Aswad from

Ladbroke Grove. At the same time West Indian artists such as Althea and Donna, Dennis Brown, Gregory Isaacs, Lee Scratch Perry, Culture, Black Uhuru, Eddie Grant, Sly Dunbar and Robbie Shakespeare alongside many others played and promoted their music in Britain. Of course, the British-born youth sporting dreadlocks are not all religious in the way of the original Jamaican Rastafarian communities. John La Rose claims:

«Rastafarianism was never one movement there are whole series and layers of movements...the generation of the 1950s-1960s which became active in politics were part of the black power, black consciousness movement – Afros – “black is beautiful”, all that – this new generation, the younger generation, self-confident, full of thrust, they tend in the majority to be Rastafarian... either religious, which is the minority, secular or popular...he [sic] has his hair, he buys the posters, and things of that sort and he thinks it significant because he is against Babylon» (La Rose, 2011, 37).

3. Living on the Front Line

Ever since 1948 the black presence had been growing and transforming British society. The birth of the Notting Hill carnival in 1965 symbolised this process, growing through the 1970s as a celebration of the Trinidadian carnival form in the old imperial capital. The transformation and cultural radicalisation of the 1960s and beyond was rooted in protest and the struggle for civil rights that was so visibly strengthened and emboldened in the US. Although we should not automatically make analogies between the

experience of empire, slavery and racism in the US and the UK, alongside the differences there are many points of similarity. The roots of rock and roll and the 1960s pop culture were in black music, both the blues of the American deep south and their northern echoes, as well as the Caribbean element that played its part in importing musical form and performers into the US. Of course, all pop cultures were transformed in the process, creating multicultural values not just in allegiance with the struggles for justice but also through shared affiliations with soul, blues and other new musical and cultural forms as they blossomed and infected the old ways of living. It accompanied the explosion of musical subcultures – rock and roll, pop, blues and soul, reggae and punk rock, that were challenging and changing the old values, tastes and fashions of youth across the Western world and beyond. Although the percentage of the black population was a little larger in other London boroughs such as Lewisham, Hackney and Brent, Brixton was the district where black people were more concentrated into particular streets and council wards. With its sound systems, she beens and black businesses, it had become the spiritual heart of multicultural Britain.

Railton Road in Brixton was known as the Front Line. LKJ recalls:

«It consisted of a row of old derelict two-storey houses and shopfronts with damp basements and peeling plaster’ He describes what sounds like the ideal locale for the amalgamation of the ‘revolting subcultures’ of the late 1970s and early 1980s: ‘In addition to the mostly black residents, the front line was

peopled by workers, the unemployed, hustlers, pimps and prostitutes, rude boys, rebels, Rastas, con artists and police informers...the centre of black street life in Brixton, an oasis of Caribbean cultural identity, resistance and rebellion. People came from all over – blacks and whites – looking for thrills and excitement or just to score some dope.’ He concludes ‘in many ways the days of the front line were my halcyon days. These were exciting times, full of laughter and tension, hope and apprehension, confrontation and celebration» (Johnson, 2023, 213-215).

CLR James, the Marxist historian who was related to Darcus Howe and spent his final years living upstairs from the office of the *Race Today* Collective on Railton Road reflected on the UK’s political prospects when interviewed in 1980. He claimed «The Rastafarians are leftists with no particular programme. But their critique of everything the British left behind, and those blacks who follow it, is very sophisticated». Like LKJ he sensed the struggle was rising, arguing «More and more people, especially black people, are alert. They reject the political choices offered to them and are looking for a new way out of the mess» (Widgery, 2017 kindle loc., 1964, 1990). Perhaps he was referring to the view of academic activists like Len Garrison who wrote *Black Youth, Rastafarianism and the Identity Crisis in Britain* concluding «Among the large body of dispossessed urban youth, many find hope and challenge in the Ras Tafari creed...as a counter-cultural protest. They now seek social and political change within the society» (Garrison, 1979, 30). This was also true of the experiences those other subcultures that bloomed at the time – such as the punks, and followers of ‘Two-Tone’

the record label that popularised a new UK-based version of Jamaican ska. The Clash followed up 1976's *White Riot* with other songs that celebrated anti-system resistance and imitated the reggae style such as *Bank Robber*, *Armageddon Time*, *The guns of Brixton* and their popular cover of Junior Murvin's hit *Police and Thieves*, whilst *The Specials*, *Ghost Town* sat at number one through the period of summer uprisings across the UK in 1981.

Novelist Alex Wheatle moved to Brixton at the age of 16 after having been brought up in residential care in nearby Croydon and revelled in the subcultural realities of life. In his memoir, *Sufferah* he recalls:

«Reggae was played on pirate radio stations, hi-fis and 'Brixton suitcases' on every street corner, tower block balcony, barbershop, hair salon, domino club, building site. Launderette, park, garage, market stall, Brixton Town Hall and on one memorable morning the employment exchange...The top party/blues sound systems in Brixton included Soferno B (who had a weekly residence in Villa Road), Sir Lloyd, Studio One, Front Line International and Dread Diamonds...Soferno B would board up the windows with black-painted chip and plyboard. Reggae-heads would pay their fee at the door and rave until 6 in the morning. They'd rave until noon Sunday. Girls left straight to church after washing off their makeup in the bathroom» (Wheatle, 2023, 103-105).

The sufferah clearly identified with his new surroundings and sought to become part of the culture. Alex frequently includes stories of building a reggae sound system so as to be an active part of the subculture, and how he solidified his identity as the poet of the 1981 events through his poem *Uprising*

and his arrest and imprisonment in the wake of the 1981 riots, as portrayed in Steve McQueen's *Small Axe* film series. He recalls: «I was fast approaching eighteen years old. Shopkeepers and reggae heads now recognised me. They nodded to me in the street as I passed by in a semi-swagger. I had perfected my strut. I could understand Jamaican patois and Brixtonian slang. I was becoming more confident with every passing day. I now considered myself a ripe Brixtonian» (Wheatle, 2023, 108). Besides the Soferno B sound system, there was also Soferno B's record shack:

«populated by sound men and idlers who were all nodding their heads like stepping chickens...leant over the counter giving affirmative nods to the busy assistant whenever they liked a tune...Jamaican patois filled the air as sound men tried to make themselves heard over the murderous bassline. Reggae album sleeves covered the walls, along with flyers promoting the gigs of untold sound systems» (Wheatle, 2001, 61-2).

4. Conclusion

The punk/reggae fusion of youth subcultures played a fundamental part in establishing the identities and values of many young people in this generation. It was a practical celebration of multiculturalism that challenged the narrow nationalism and rising far right politics of that era. In 1976 these subcultures exploded into national consciousness as black youth began to actively resist their criminalisation by the police – a process that built up to the series of uprisings in the

inner cities of Britain in 1981 (Clement, 2025). Punk began as a rejection of the old stale rock culture and an experiment in new musical forms and identities that celebrated this rejection whilst looking to identifying with anti-racism and the new musical forms of reggae and the dub subculture. When the Clash chose to record Junior Murvin's *Police and Thieves*, a song which had been the soundtrack to the Notting Hill riots of 1976, they popularised this crossover with punk, a moment that Bob Marley celebrated with his *Punky Reggae Party* recorded the following year. Arguably this climate of resistance and anti-racism was a key ingredient in preventing the triumph of the right over the next few years - despite the election of Margaret Thatcher.

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