Youth in Contemporary Capitalism

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"Ah, get born, keep warm,
Short pants, romance, learn to dance,
Get dressed, get blessed,
Try to be a success,
Please her, please him, buy gifts,
Don't steal, don't lift,
Twenty years of schoolin,
And they put you on day shift,
Look out, kid
They keep it all hid" . . .

Bob Dylan
Subterranean Homesick Blues

Introduction—The Historical Context

Throughout much of the nineteen-sixties the streets rang to the chants of thousands protesting against the threat of nuclear war and against the US war in Vietnam. This huge movement, which at its peak was capable of putting one hundred thousand on the streets, was overwhelmingly composed of young people. It was in this context that the student movement began to flex its muscles over its demands. In the same period successive waves of youth leisure-styles appeared—the Mods, the Mersey Sound, the hippies and others. For many, the essence of struggle was generational, the young confronting the corrupt and decaying system of the old.

The YCL evolved what was for that time a novel approach to relating both to these political struggles and cultural movements, an approach exemplified by the "Trend is Communism" campaign. By refusing to dismiss the cultural life of the young as unimportant, the YCL was able to bring substantial numbers of young people to the League.

But as the sixties drew to a close, two new phenomena became predominant. Apart from the student movement, the mass youth movement of the sixties declined. Whilst masses of young people were involved in the popular struggles against the 1970-74 Heath Government, they were involved as adults. They were not involved much in campaigns over specifically youthful demands by youth organisations. Indeed, the gains of that period, such as the TUC Youth Conference, or the formation of NUSS, though of great importance, were not the product of youth campaigns nearing the scale of those of the adult movement, or of the previous decade. All political youth organisations, including the YCL, entered a period of decline.

Secondly, within the YCL, this was added to by the events in Czechoslovakia which crystallised a sectarian and dogmatic tendency against the innovations made by the League. This was fuelled by those who saw the chance to oppose the Party from within the League. Thus the YCL entered a period where internal strife was the dominating factor. Though serious internal differences still remain, we can say that this period was brought to a close by the decisive League Congress of April last year.

Throughout the seventies it has become increasingly apparent that we must try to rectify a serious weakness in the work of the previous decade. We must evolve a theoretical framework which can relate to the political advances made, and correct the consequent lack of strategic perspective for the Young Communists.

An advance in so doing was made in the Marxism Today "Trends in Youth Culture" debate a few years ago. But the debate suffered from two major weaknesses. To some extent, it turned out to be not a debate on 'trends' at all, but about internal differences as to whether a genuine youth culture even existed. As such, it held up a mirror not to young people, but to the fight against Stalinism in the YCL and Communist Party. Secondly, the potential scope was limited by the whole 'youth culture' approach, which takes youth leisure-styles as a starting-point, rather than deriving them from the social position of young people within capitalism.

Thus it was that important theoretical advances were made outside the framework of the Communist movement. Whilst many volumes have been written on topics such as problems of educa-
tional theory, adolescent sexuality or juvenile delinquency, until recently most of them were from a non-Marxist viewpoint. A significant feature of the past few years, however, has been the attempt by Marxist or left-wing academics to interpret these studies, to conduct their own original surveys, and to elaborate an alternative theoretical framework. Paul Bradshaw’s Cogito\textsuperscript{2} article in 1976 started a process of discussion of these matters in the YCL, and of relating them to our ideas on the economic, social and cultural situation of young people in Britain.

The following article is an attempt to take our theoretical work further by posing questions about the nature of youth under capitalism, about their relationship to major institutions, and their responses to these institutions. What follows is by no means intended as the last word on the subject—indeed, much is merely thinking aloud.

Definitions of Youth

"Be careful, there’s a baby in the house, And a baby will not be fooled, It’s a thing brand new, Does what it wants to, Until you get it schooled."

Loudon Wainwright III

Baby in the House

The question “What is youth?” seems an obvious one, indeed so obvious that it is rarely asked. ‘Common sense’ answers are easy to come by. We could specify age limits; between 13 and 28, the ‘teens’ and so on. Such definitions are bedevilled by arbitrariness—why choose one age-range rather than another? Or we can talk of the ages at which people gain civil or social rights, the school-leaving age, the age of consent, the age at which you can vote, the age when full trade union rights are granted, or full adult pay. But then these ages are fixed in law or custom by a whole number range rather than another? Or we can talk of the emergences of two institutions: the family as we know it today, or its somewhat extended predecessor, and the modern school system. As late as the early nineteenth century puberty became recognised as the lowest age for entry into military service. But it was not until the advent of widespread industrial wage-labour that modern ideas of childhood gripped the lowest classes of society. This led to the struggles of the nineteenth century which culminated in the laws against child labour and the introduction of compulsory schooling. These reforms gave legal expression to the concept that childhood ended not at 6 or 7, when the child could look after itself, talk properly etc., but at 18 rather than at 21. These reforms gave legal expression to the concept that childhood ended not at 6 or 7, but with the onset of puberty.

I think there is an indication here that our present view of youth, which is so closely related to that of childhood, is perhaps a recent development, related to changes in the family, school and work.

\textsuperscript{2} Paul Bradshaw. “Trends in Youth Culture in the Seventies”. Cogito, Theoretical and Discussion Journal of the YCL, No. 3.
Reproduction of Labour Power

The point is that the social position of young people has little to do with their being a stage in the biological cycle of reproduction of the species. It is very much to do with their being a stage in the cycle of the reproduction of labour-power. That is, at least, in the case of the vast majority destined to be wage-slaves or domestic labourers (housewives). In fact youth is more than a stage. We are talking here of a process—a process of change in the relationship of an individual to the means of production.

The case I wish to make is that youth consists of the transition from the reproduction relations that characterise childhood to the production relations that belong to adult life.

It is fairly obvious that the reproduction of a skilled and able work force, of labour-power, is just as necessary for the survival of human society as is the reproduction of the other productive forces. It is, for instance, just as necessary to replace that part of the work force worn out through death, old age or illness as it is to replace worn-out machinery or food that has been eaten.

It is perhaps less obvious that the social position of the child is determined by its subordination in this process of reproduction of labour-power. Its relationship to production is parasitic, just consuming without producing anything. Once it has become able physically to look after itself it is packed off to school to begin the long process of consuming the skills needed for production in the modern world, and of consuming the 'right attitudes' to life. It has a subordinate position in the family, dependent on Mum and Dad who make the major decisions affecting the child's life. A thread that runs through the child's situation is its subordinate role, its essential passivity and lack of control over its own life. You can't choose your parents, or your family, what and how you learn at school. Even leisure-time is limited by lack of financial independence and other factors. This subordination is even codified in laws as children can be assaulted by their parents up to the point of 'battering'. Teachers are in loco parentis, making them the only profession able legally to assault people in the course of a day's work! Children internalise their situation; it is part of their view of themselves and the world.

The child and young person does not 'naturally' grow into the role of the adult: on the contrary, it is channelled into it through the three main institutions of family, school and work. Other institutions may be involved too, and we shall touch on this later. These institutions do not only impart the social skills the young will need for a fully productive life, they also impart social values that reflect and reinforce the system. This is crucial in countries such as Britain where the capitalist class has relied mainly, though by no means exclusively, on securing consent to its role from the populace. Communists are abandoning crude conspiratorial notions of how capitalist rule is maintained, and are beginning to emphasise how capitalism wins consent on a day-to-day basis. However, insufficient prominence is given to the winning of consent on a generational basis, yet the latter is of central importance to capitalism, precisely because the future contribution of youth has yet to be assured. After all, if the system produces young people with ideas and attitudes significantly different from the present norms, then the status quo cannot count on lasting very long.

Three Institutions

How can we summarise the role of family, school and work?

Engels wrote of the family as being analogous to bourgeois society with the father representing the role of the ruling class. Through learning deference to parental and especially paternal authority, children, to some degree, imitate a deference to authority in general. The women's movement has made us much more aware of the part played by the family in instilling sex roles and stereotypes into children and young people. And, of course, the first social and political attitudes and ideas are learnt through the medium of the family. It is worth observing here that all our 'commonsense' definitions of youth take puberty as their base-line. Its significance arises from its directing of the child's emotional life towards making strong relationships with people its own age, relationships which can be chosen. This break with passivity starts the long process of moving out of a subordinate role in one family to forming the dominant part (Mum or Dad) of another.

In school a further myriad of social values are learnt, either taught consciously or transmitted through the nature of the set-up. History is mis-taught alongside the fact that middle-class people teach, working class people listen. Compulsory religious education is received in a system which presupposes that knowledge comes from on high and makes a rarity the sharing of knowledge by the pupils, or collective work by them. The exam system in particular is geared to a concept of knowledge as a commodity which must be possessed by individuals.

Schools are surprisingly status conscious, most

4 For example, see Jean Coussins' Cogito article in Cogito No. 3, Belotti's "Little Girls" etc.
being careful to grant more freedom in areas such as subject choice or dress to the senior students as compared to their juniors. It is as though care is taken to progressively wean school students out of the subordinate roles and attitudes that society itself places on them.

The transition to work is usually thought of as being pretty abrupt, and I suppose in the main it is. You leave school and get a job, if you’re lucky. But important lessons are learnt before then. The Saturday job, the paper round, the job in the school ‘hols’, or baby-sitting for neighbours all teach that money doesn’t only enable consumption, it also enables independence from the family. Once in full-time work, the battle for adult status still has to be fought out—training may continue for years and often many rights do not come till it ends. Young people are used as run-arounds, do the menial jobs, are expected to make tea and nip down to the shops for elevenses and so on.

At work the young person is supposed to learn the ‘right attitudes’ to ‘getting on’. A proportion of young people accept the notion that individual advancement, not collective struggle, is the only way to get a better deal out of the system. And in the past, at least to some extent, capitalism has been able to meet this expectation. But the reality of the class barriers, together with the power of the labour movement, provides another centre of ideological attraction.

In pointing out some of the ruling class pressures within school and work I am not saying that these institutions in themselves are reactionary. On the contrary, there is much that is positive in them. Far from calling for the abolition of school and work we aim for their massive extension in the context of a complete change in their structure. Indeed, the present priorities are to defend our hard-won rights in both spheres. The very different demands for educational reform, or real industrial democracy, or the right to work, take us into the realms of political campaigning outside the scope of this article. In relation to the family it is my view that the slogan “abolish the family”, which begs the question as to what could replace it in the foreseeable future, is as pathetic as a political demand as is “defend the family” which would institutionalise the oppression of women, children and young people within it. The need is for the movement to take up demands for full rights for these three sections, whether they be within a standard family unit or not.

Age-Chauvinism

"People try to put us down
Just because we g-get around."

The Who : My Generation

“These men they don’t like you
Don’t like the things you do,
You got no money
They think you’re useless
So you are!”

The Clash: Remote Control

Before moving on I think it is worth considering if there are any social attitudes which justify and reinforce the subordinate position of young people in the institutions we have considered and in society in general. Can one put forward the concept of an anti-youth ideology, that treats young people as inferior beings? I would suggest there is something like that; akin to male-chauvinism, an ideology we could call age-chauvinism. Perhaps the ‘bring back the birch’ brigade, or remarks like Hailsham’s that the police should be allowed to slap youths, are particularly virulent manifestations. But the belief that young people can’t run their own lives and need to be told what to do are paternalistic attitudes overwhelmingly present in our society. For example, NUT leader Max Morris told an amazed TV reporter that the Taylor Report on Management of Schools should be rejected because school students did not really want pupil governors! As I have mentioned, young people at work are given a lower status and menial jobs, even by their workmates—another example of age-chauvinism. Again, the devaluing of the cultural creativity of young people is fairly common, many people believing that only rock stars can make rock music worth listening to. The bans on new wave groups from the GLC and other councils are another example of age-chauvinist mentality.

Intimately bound up with age-chauvinism is the suppression and denial of the sexuality of young people. In the so-called ‘permissive society’ the attitude of society to young people and sex is two-faced. On the one hand young people are expected to have sexuality, on the other they are denied the knowledge and conditions that would allow them to express it. Sex education is still lacking in many schools, and often it is so ‘biological’ that it has no bearing on the real sexual problems of young people. Knowledge of, and availability of contraceptive methods is still too limited. The number of prosecutions under the age of consent laws (16 years for girls, 21 years for male homosexuals) is by no means inconsiderable, although it is recognised it is not uncommon or unnatural to have sex before these ages. Perhaps the biggest sexual problem facing young people is simply the lack of anywhere to make love; and it is just this sort of problem that society treats as a joke, despite the anguish it causes to countless numbers of young people. All this means that youth faces a
The struggle simply to assert its right to a sexual life. Any attempt to politicise that struggle is regarded as extremely dangerous by the establishment, as the hysterical response to the Little Red School Book showed.  

I now want to touch on what I consider to be a related problem, the attitude of society to old people. Capitalism feels quite able in Britain to dump all those over retirement age into the poverty of the old age pension. But there is a wider problem too. The images beloved of the media are usually those of the nuclear family, which constitutes the main institution of consumption. This is of great importance in our advertisement-oriented age. There is no way that these stereotypes can be lived up to by older people who are made to feel superfluous to society’s needs. In my experience even communists sometimes do not take the problems of old age seriously, or discount the viewpoint of old people. It is as though once you are no longer engaged in production you are inferior to everyone else. At its roots this phenomenon is similar to the attitudes towards youth who have yet to enter full production relations.

Some Consequences

Some interesting points emerge from this type of analysis.

Firstly, the situation of the child in society emerges as of great importance to the study of young people, and should be more debated by Marxists.

Secondly, the central significance of sexual politics emerges in a sharper light. Boys and girls learn different adult roles in the process of transition through family and school. In fact they pass through these institutions (and consequently through leisure-time) in very different ways. The reasons for this are mainly that a conception of sex roles (e.g. boys towards work, girls towards motherhood) is built into these institutions themselves.

For example, the girl will tend to be more closely bound to the family and spend more time in the home because she is usually expected to perform an economic function within it. It is usual for the girl to be expected to do jobs such as cooking, laundry or looking after younger children, whilst the boy is often exempt from such expectations. This may well be reflected in a difference of leisure patterns.

Much has also been written of the pressures that operate both from inside and outside the educational system to keep girls out of subjects which are either thought of as being male (e.g. metalwork) or have relevance to a long-term career. In many schools girls do not have adequate choice in any case.

In the transition to work, many girls lose out because they have been taught to see work as a stop-gap until they marry, rather than as a career. Some jobs like building trades or engineering are still seen as male preserves. In spite of legislation, many discriminatory factors work to keep girls off apprenticeships and training schemes.

Apart from sex stereotyping inherent in these social institutions themselves, other pressures are brought to bear on girls and young women. For example, take girls’ magazines whose circulation runs into hundreds of millions each year. I will not detail the blatant sexist content, merely point out that a monopoly such as IPC has a whole range of publications, from girls’ comics to women’s magazines, graded by age. They take care to wean girls through their successive publications. It is as though a massive pressure is needed to batter girls and young women into a passive, male-dominated role.

Thus adolescence is much more of a mixed blessing for girls than it is for boys. Lust as girls are attempting to assert greater control over their lives, a whole new series of constraints are slapped on them. They must learn how to be a sex object: they must know how to attract a man (‘don’t get left on the shelf’ without initiating a sexual move (‘don’t get labelled a “scrubber”’); the girls’ newly-found freedom is only to accept or decline the advances of men.

Resistance and rebellion

“Rebel in evening, rebel in the morning too”

U-Roy: Natty Rebel

“There ain’t no future in England’s dreaming”

Sex Pistols: God Save the Queen

The third consequence is that being young means to be involved in a particular struggle. It is the inevitable companion of youth. The fight is against the passivity and lack of control that is the child’s role in society. The fight is a real one because the young person has to actively change his or her relationship with society. Not only must struggle be engaged in with a world that wants to keep them passive, but also a struggle must take place inside each individual. They must fight with

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5 A similar response greeted Wilhelm Reich’s pamphlet The Sexual Struggle of Youth, written for the German YCL and published in 1932. Forty-six years later it makes fascinating reading.

6 In 1973 35 per cent of all boys and 10 per cent of all girls obtained day or block release, 80 per cent of all girl trainees are in one trade—hairdressing.
themselves for the confidence to take decisions and control their own lives. But if you are trying to do new things, and if you are in a process of struggle and change the question ‘What about my future?’ becomes all important. Are the roles of Mum and Dad so attractive in society? If you are fighting for more active control in life it may be pretty obvious that the lives of working class adults are still incredibly limited in reality. The conclusion that they are limited because of the economic and social pressures of capitalism is one that as yet only a minority come to.

But many do come to the conclusion that a collective identity or collective struggle are needed to stand against the pressures on them to assume a role they find undesirable. It is not surprising that a thread that links the aspirations and struggles of young people has been their anti-authoritarian character. This is evident as much in the stance of the Mods as in today's new wave. On a more political level, some of the most important youth battles have been on the right to adopt by British Communists assumes greater relevance in this light.

From James Dean through Bob Dylan to Big Youth and Johnny Rotten, the equation youth equals rebel has had a strong presence in post-war capitalism, and perhaps that is no accident either. I believe we could envisage youth of the working class defined in the broadest sense, as representing the ‘weakest link’ in the maintenance of the status quo. This is because the reproduction of labour-power involves also reproduction of relations of production. The potential labour force must be prepared not only for work, but also for wage-labour within capitalism. The transitional position of young people in reproduction of labour-power consequently gives them a transitional position in the reproduction of the dominant ideology. This is recognised by the capitalists who now fear that the disruption of the former process by mass youth unemployment may give them problems in securing the latter. The establishment is concerned at increasing Left and ultra-right activity on the dole queues. Revolutionaries, too, have recognised that it is the young who are usually in the forefront of progressive and revolutionary struggles.

Responses of young people

"They hit you at home
And they beat you at school. . . ."  
John Lennon: Working Class Hero

How is the resistance or rebellion of young people expressed?

Tension, resentment and aggravation often build up within the family, but this is a private world not open to collective struggle. Besides, it is worthwhile avoiding conflicts with people you love. So you vote with your feet, spend little time at home, or leave it altogether.

The average comprehensive school is a cauldron seething with social and class tensions. But it is so tightly controlled that constructive collective struggle is made extraordinarily difficult, as the consistent harassment of NUSS has shown. For most people the only channels for frustration are negative individualistic acts such as lesson disruption and vandalism.

The YCL’s recent pamphlet7 showed that young workers are easiest to sack. Often they do the most peripheral jobs and do not know their rights. And with youth unemployment what it is, there are plenty more where they came from. Combine this with the ‘historic neglect’ of the labour movement—and it is hard for young people to express fruitfully discontent at the workplace. In the past at least young people have tended to leave jobs they did not like.

So the tendency is for these factors to make family, school and work ‘no go’ areas for youth activity. They cause a displacement of resistance and rebellion into leisure-time. Leisure is shared by all young people and though choice is restricted by availability, money and social factors, it is by far the freest part of young peoples’ lives. Not surprisingly it is called ‘free time’. This is why so much of youth activity is bound up with creating a leisure identity. For the average working class youth, with no contact with politics, no other avenue of resistance is available. It is worth noting that although ‘Youth out of order’ is a favourite media theme the location of these events is almost never at work, seldom at school, overwhelmingly on the streets, football terraces and at rock concerts.

This concept of displacement is a crucial one for us, not least because the ruling class has attempted to defuse its consequences.

Organised Leisure

Their most politically-aware response has a touch of genius about it—organise the leisure of working class youth. Thus was the genesis of our mass youth organisations such as the YMCA, Scouts, Guides and Youth Clubs.

Though many preferred religion to the openly

7 Young People and Industry in the Seventies available from Central Books.
pro-imperialist stand of the Scouts, it’s useful to take a quote from one of Baden-Powell’s handbooks:

“There are men who, through their orators and their literature, preach class hatred and down with everything. . . . It is simple mad Bolshevism such as might bring about the downfall not merely of capitalists but ruin the great mass of quiet, steady-going citizens and wage earners.”

Of course the Scouts have changed along with the other mass youth organisations. Most of the jingoism has gone and progressive people and ideas have made an impact. Our strategy should be to help create an environment where they can open up to political debate, and come together with other youth organisations. With the Scouts topping 600,000 for the first time ever, the Guides even bigger, half a million members in the National Association of Youth Clubs, the influence of these organisations cannot be overestimated. It is a testimony to the age-chauvinism in our movement that these groups find.”

The Media

The control culture has a particular relationship with the media—very much feeding off each other. It is depressing to see how little has changed in the media reportage of youth stories. Stanley Cohen in his book *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* studied press treatment of the Mods and Rockers. Very minor incidents would be exaggerated or distorted by the papers with headlines such as ‘Riot’ or ‘Day of Terror’, for example. This would brand all young people who were either Mods or Rockers as folk devils, to be feared, shunned—and exercised. The control culture became so sensitised that any young person in Mod gear was liable to be harassed and get tough treatment for minor offences. Does any of this sound familiar? Well, I reckon The Clash Rainbow concert early in 1977 established punks as the new folk devils—‘Punks Riot’ screamed the press when fairly minor damage was done. I was there so I know there was no riot, but the image has been created and must now be retailed whether the facts fit or not. A clipping from the *Luton Post* is revealing: “Punk Rockers threaten to run wild in hall.” The first few paragraphs are a sensationalised description of what could be any rock concert—right at the bottom we read: “the entertainment manager said ‘one or two minor problems but they weren’t insurmountable. There were a few cases of minor damage.’” Here was the actuality but it wouldn't make such a good headline would it?

A noticeable feature recently has been the press concentration on Punk/Ted rivalries. Cohen’s book documents how very minor Mod/Rocker friction was picked by the press and presented as though it was almost the *raison d’etre* for each group—they lived to fight the other lot. This presentation actually precipitated greater hostility between the Mods and Rockers. Is this what is being done with the Punk and Ted conflict? I would emphasise that I do not believe the press to be engaged in a conscious anti-youth conspiracy. They act like they do to cash in on people’s gut reaction against any behaviour which departs from the norm. Cohen’s conclusion is rather prophetic:

“More moral panics will be generated and other as yet nameless folk devils will be created. This is not because such developments have an inexorable inner logic, but because our society as present structured will continue to generate problems for some of its members—like working class adolescents—and then condemn whatever solution these groups find.”

8 Baden-Powell, 1918 Scouting towards Reconstruction, quoted in *Resistance through Rituals.*

9 Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics,* Paladin.
The Youth Industry

"Welcome to the Machine" — Pink Floyd

The fourth form of response has, of course, been the commercialisation of youth styles, which probably has its origins in Eugene Gilbert’s cunning exploitation of the ‘teenage consumer’ in the early fifties. The galaxy of record companies, fashion industries, music papers, magazines, undoubtedly both diffuse and defuse grass roots innovations in their mass communication of them.

Paul Corrigan and Simon Frith have rightly written that the response of most of the left to commercialism within youth culture has been variations on the theme of ‘corruption of the innocent’. While right-wingers have never failed to denounce new leisure-styles as red conspiracies, left dogmatists have denounced them as commercial conspiracies designed to divert young people from the class struggle. In both schemes the rebel heroes of youth cultures appear as electronic pied-pipers, leading their flock to a destiny of degenerate hedonism.

Of course, if the foregoing analysis shows anything, it is that young people are in no way ‘innocent’ of capitalism. They are firmly entrenched in its institutional structure. As for the notion of ‘corruption’, I can find no better words than those of Corrigan and Frith themselves, commenting on the *Marxism Today* debate cited earlier:

"Certainly the agencies of pop culture (record companies and teenage magazines and clothes shops and so on) exploit young people (hardly a surprising aspect of capitalism); the question is to what extent they manipulate them. The picture the left offers... vivid enough in the pages of *Marxism Today*, fades somewhat before the reality of West Ham’s North End or a Slade concert. Are these exuberant, proud, belligerent, solid kids really best understood as pure consumers? The mindless creatures of commerce? Once again the distinction must be made between institutional and ideological incorporation—the fact that young people are heavily involved in commercial institutions does not mean their response is simply a determined one... we cannot base our arguments simply on the intentions of the exploiters."

Those who write off the popular innovative part of youth leisure-styles show their contempt for working class young people. That innovative aspect co-exists with the commercial one. In the past the commercial machine, that nebulous net of the establishment, has always succeeded in becoming dominant. The young rebel from next door finds him or herself a millionaire superstar and gradually tax avoidance seems more important than roots rock. Bands must submit to the designs of the music media moguls or make way for ones which will. By such mechanisms have the ruling class inflicted real defeats on successive generations; the symbols of youth revolt are emasculated to become the pampered children of the system. Each Elvis Presley, Eric Clapton, Mick Jagger or Rod Stewart caught up in the machine thus deadens the fire in their followers.

However, there is no mysterious law that decrees that this process shall last as long as popular music does. On the contrary, commercialism can only dominate if there is no organised opposition to it, while no other forces are strong enough to retain their cultural ground. As Tom Bell said at the 1977 Congress:

"Inexorably the genuine cultural movement from among young people themselves will arise, forcing the canned culture of the monopolies to come to terms with them. So far monopoly has done more than come to terms with these movements, it has been able to assimilate them, when they are at the stage of rebellion. This in turn helps maintain the credibility of ruling class ideas among young people. Marxists therefore rather than dismissing these movements as secondary should in fact seek to become the force that assimilates them, and develops them from the rebellion to the revolutionary stages of consciousness."

The Left, through its intervention in the cultural field cannot only complement rebellious ideas with revolutionary ones, but also, crucially, provide an arena for cultural expression and development free of commercial pressures. At present, vistas are exciting in this respect. The punk rock new wave, that burst of energy from the white ghettos, is the most politically aware white rock music to date. There is an explicit left current and an anti-music industry groundswell. The commercial aspects are already very marked, and probably will succeed in becoming dominant in the end. If so, there will be other ‘new waves’ in the future which we must understand much more quickly than in the past. It is essential for us to achieve a relationship between popular movement and popular culture similar to that between Popular Unity and the Folk Song Movement in Chile.


11 31st YCL Congress Report 30p from YCL, 16 King Street, WC2.
though undoubtedly the cultural form will be profoundly different.

I have listed four forms of response by the establishment to young people expressing themselves in leisure. Responses are what they are, responses to the genuine resistance, rebellion, and sometimes creativity of young people themselves.

**Political Implications**

Finally I want to deal with some of the consequences of all this for the YCL.

How should we fight for the concept of a Young Communist League? This is not an academic question; it concerns us now. Many communists feel there is no need for a youth organisation in modern Britain. Others admit to being unsure. YCLers would welcome a discussion here, because we feel sure that only by such debate can the pressing need for communist youth work emerge.

Often we quote the brilliant insight of Lenin's [12] about young people needing to approach socialism by a route in some way different from their elders, or about older people not knowing how to approach the youth. Or we quote Carrillo's [13] points about young people seeing the present through the eyes of what could be possible, as compared to their parents who view the present as an improvement on the past. We should not be content with these insights which are on the political rather than theoretical level. We need to extend them to look at youth as it exists today.

I believe that we should be fighting for the YCL on the grounds that young people constitute a unique social force, struggling to articulate specific oppressions. They are a social force every bit as real as women or black people, but with only a tiny movement to give voice to their aspirations. Remember that only one section of youth—the students—have a movement of a mass campaigning nature. Young people are a social force that could give rise to a movement that would make as great or greater impact on political life in Britain than the others I mentioned; but because we have to deal with deeply ingrained age-chauvinism it is essential for a mass democratic youth movement to be autonomous if it is to speak for young people. We must have that autonomy now. These points are of great relevance to the need for an autonomous YCL which has to work within a movement where age-chauvinism is rife. In other words, the primary task of the YCL is not to 'groom' cadres for the Party, but to participate in the construction of a mass youth movement. All democratic forces, including the Communist Party, will benefit from such a development.

A number of communists have said to me "If youth has the YCL, why shouldn't there be a separate communist women's or black organisation?" Well, I do not want to speak against the ability of these sections to work out policies to deal with their specific oppressions, on the contrary I think it essential for them to have even greater facilities to do so, but I would argue that there is a fundamental difference between their situation and that of young people. You stay a woman, you stay black, but you do not stay young. It is precisely because youth is a transitional category that a separate organisation is so essential.

It is clear that higher education is very much part of the process of the reproduction of the labour force. Without denying the difference between student struggle and other youth struggles, I would suggest that there are strong affinities between them. Whether the present organisational forms of communist students take enough account of the potential role of students in the youth movement, age-chauvinism, and their functions as intellectuals, is a matter for further debate.

**The Future**

The next point is that if the above analysis means anything it means that the generation gap is in many respects a real feature of capitalism. The very institutions of capitalism mean that young people experience oppression in ways that are sometimes in contradiction with older people. We should not attempt to collapse the oppressions into the oppression of capital full stop, or the contradictions experienced by young people into that between capital and labour; this is the ultra-left technique beloved by Trotskyism and Stalinism and it distances us from young people. We need to recognise the contradictions between young and old if we are to be able to overcome them.

There were voices in the YCL Congress which

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12 "The middle-aged and the aged often do not know how to approach the youth, for the youth must of necessity advance to socialism in a different way, by other paths, in other forms, in other circumstances than their fathers. Incidentally, that is why we must decidedly favour organisational independence of the Youth League, not only because the opportunists fear such independence, but because of the very nature of the case. For unless they have complete independence, the youth will be unable either to train good socialists from their midst or prepare themselves to lead Socialism forward". V. I. Lenin, *The Youth International*. December 1916.

said we should base our politics at the point of production because that was where the contradictions were most intense. We point out the existence of other contradictions, not necessarily as inherently antagonistic as that between capital and labour, but which oppress people nevertheless. The foregoing analysis shows that contradictions in the four different areas of family, school, leisure and work oppress young people. Our Congress was about adopting policies to overcome those contradictions through intervention in social life, cultural life, sexual politics, school and work, and the general political situation. We base our politics at the points of reproduction since that is where young people are. Even at work the specific youth issues are training, union rights and the like—that is those concerned with the role of the workplace in reproduction.

We still have a long way to go in developing our ideas if we are to be able to intervene politically in the life of young people. For too long communists have been merely repeating formulas about youth instead of developing Marxism to describe their situation. A crucial task for the YCL is to contribute to the process of creating a new arena both in theoretical concepts and in the real world for a mass democratic youth movement to take its place in British society.

We are calling 1978 'The Year of the Young Communists'; during the year the YCL Executive Committee will publish a strategy for the youth movement. It is to be hoped that it will provoke discussion amongst communists, the left and all democratic forces.