

Subcultural and Social Innovations in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament

George McKay

*While we rebel with marches and music and words
they'll fight us back through the propaganda of 'popular' media.*
— Crass, *Nagasaki Nightmare* (sleeve liner notes, 1980)

In times of war and rumours of peace, when 'terrorism' and 'torture' are being revisited and redefined, one of the things some of us should be doing is talking and writing about *cultures of peace*. In what follows, I ask questions about the place of culture in protest by considering the cluster of issues around the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) from its founding in London in 1958. I look at instances of (sub)cultural innovation within the social and political spaces CND helped make available during its two high periods of activity and membership: the 1950s (campaigning against the hydrogen bomb) and the 1980s (campaigning against U.S.-controlled cruise missiles). What particularly interests me here is tracing the reticence and tensions within CND to the (sub)cultural practices with which it had varying degrees of involvement or complicity. It is *not* my wish to argue in any way that there was a kind of dead hand of CND stifling cultural innovation from within; rather I want to tease out ambivalences in some of its responses to the intriguing and energetic cultural practices it helped birth. CND was founded at a significant moment for emerging political cultures. Its energies and strategies contributed to the rise of the New Left, to new postcolonial identities and negotiations in Britain, and to the Anti-Apartheid Movement. In what ways did it attempt to police the 'outlaw emotions' it helped to release?

It is frequently acknowledged that orthodox subculture theory has become limited. Greg Martin has recently articulated some of the theoretical issues involved, which include the identification of 'the limits of cultural politics or struggles waged *exclusively* at the level of lifestyle'. Is culture simply decorative, superstructural—and is its analysis diversionary or delusional? Is a focus on culture a compensatory one, even a symptom of failure to institute social change? Martin identifies the significant doubt expressed by many theorists 'as to the potency of symbolic challenges.... [It is their view that] the state and "proper politics" are still relevant and that social class and material issues continue to be important'. Post-subcultural studies, on the other hand, has preferred to show ways in which the rigidities of the influential Birmingham school are limiting—using then new sonic-social developments like dance culture to focus on the mediation of subculture (Sarah Thornton's 1995 *Clubcultures*) or on its eclectic postmodernisation (Steve Redhead's 1993 *Rave Off*). These are all valid and conceptually useful critiques and developments. However, my primary concern is that this shift risks losing some of the intriguing links between subcultures and radical political cultures. Part of the purpose of this article is to explore links between social movement organisations like CND and their relationship with cognate cultural and subcultural practices.

In his work on anti-nuclear protest, *Mobilizing Modernity*, Ian Welsh joins a long line of sociologists pointing out that 'social and cultural experimentation and innovation within [social movements] has been largely neglected'. But Welsh himself pays little critical attention to questions of their related political *cultures*, that is, their forms and expressions such as music, visual art, and fashion. Over the decades there have indeed been many general cultural and critical responses from CND members and other activists to the nuclear deconstruction of rationality. These include:

- Romantic protest and countermodern or atavistic gestures such as traditional jazz and folk music, and green festivals;
- Chauvinistic appeal to the British culture of parliamentary democracy to give (in A.J.P. Taylor's words) 'moral leadership to the world';

- An embracing by campaigners of the irrational, whether in some new age rhetorics, or a retreat into a Celtic imaginary;
- Gendered identity and community, along with a radical critique or even rejection of patriarchy (most notably at Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp in the 1980s);
- Existential outrage and an 'aesthetic of anger' (in the influential British anarcho-punk collective Crass);
- A cyberpunk/slacker 'boredom with the Apocalypse' (Bruce Sterling).

CND may constitute an exemplar of a campaign movement which has had striking impact on *cultural* protest, even if its political impact has been largely a failure. But it remains the case that the cultural aspects of CND which have been less than fully explored, or even fully narrated. The minutes, committees, membership lists, and official publications of these campaigns should form the basis of historical study. Their cultural tangents and offshoots—the soundtracks, the benefit concerts, the life-changing gatherings, the ephemera and marginalia—may be too often marginalized.

There are four primary cultural/social innovations linked to CND that interest me: the Aldermaston march (1958-mid 1960s); the rise of Crass and anarchopunk (1979-1984); the Glastonbury CND Festival (1981-1990); and the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp (1980s). I'll look at each in turn.

The founding and merging of both left-wing journals and CND campaigns is linked with burgeoning youth movements, as well as with a revivification of national, post-imperial and Commonwealth cultures. For instance, in the late 1950s the launch of *New Left Review* under the editorship of Stuart Hall benefited from and contributed to the rise of CND. As Dennis Dworkin has written in *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain*, 'the growth of the New Left was deeply intertwined with the expansion of the CND. With the growth of the Aldermaston marches and the continued multiplication of disarmament supporters, a growing constituency existed for an alternative socialist politics'. Even prior to the Aldermaston Nuclear Weapons Research Centre marches beginning in 1958, we can see in CND what we now recognise as a youth or lifestyle protest movement. The first seeds of alternative/youth festival culture were beginning to germinate and sprout during the late 1950s.

David Widgery has described that first Aldermaston march as 'a student movement before its time, a mobile sit-in or marching pop festival; in its midst could be found the first embers of the hashish underground and premature members of the Love Generation'. It is significant that the cultural countermodernism of nuclear disarmament found its most visible expressions not in the city but in the countryside. The first Aldermaston March of Easter 1958 went *from* the city, the (still) imperial centre of London, to the countryside. Twenty-odd years later, the Greenham peace camp of inhabited much the same countryside space: the Home County of Berkshire. The Glastonbury Festival of the 1980s, during its CND-centred years, was the other tangible experience of the deep green rural.

In *Bomb Culture*, Jeff Nuttall describes the contumacious youth contingent of the Aldermaston march turning each annual event into 'a carnival of optimism'. He writes:

The [Ken] Colyer [jazz] fans, by now dubbed beatniks, ... appeared from nowhere in their grime and tatters, with their slogan daubed crazy hats and streaming filthy hair, hammering their banjos, strumming aggressively on their guitars, blowing their antiquated cornets and sousaphones, capering out in front of the march, destroying the wooden dignity of Canon Collins [and other] official leaders of the cavalcade... It was this wild public festival spirit that spread the CND symbol through all the jazz clubs and secondary schools in an incredible short time. Protest was associated with festivity.

INSERT FIGURE ONE HERE SOMEWHERE

However, there have been significant reservations within the formal organisation of CND to the subcultural and countercultural pleasures and identities which have flourished around it, and helped it to flourish. From their origins at Aldermaston, cultural formations interrogate the campaign organisation. Nuttall (like Penny Rimbaud of Crass discussed below, an aesthetic anarchist sensitive to the snub of authority and the whiff of contumacy alike) notes of these 'official leaders' that, in future years, 'With that same desolate Puritanism carried to an even further degree they banned funny hats on the march and hired official bands to play instead of the old anarchic assemblies of banjos and punctured euphoniums'.

Subcultural mobilization and experimentation also accompanied the second great membership surge in CND, during the 1980s. A sustained and radical pacifist profile within the British punk scene was established with the release of a record called *The Feeding of the Five Thousand* (1979) by the influential English band/collective Crass. According to Jon Savage, this record 'was the first of a sequence of media (records, slogans, books, posters, magazines, films, actions and concerts) so complex ... and so effective that they sowed the ground for the return of serious anarchism and the popularity of CND in the early 1980s'. In his autobiography, *Shibboleth*, Penny Rimbaud, explains the band's activist and autonomous strategy of performance:

Hundreds of people would travel to join us in scout-huts, church halls and sports centres to celebrate our mutual sense of freedom. We shared our music, films, literature, conversation, food and tea. And when the gig was over, we firstly paid the organiser's expenses, and then, where possible, used the profits to finance local activists.... [O]ur efforts on the road slowly bought [*sic*] CND back to life. We were responsible for introducing it to thousands of people who would later become the backbone of its revival. *A new and hitherto uninformed sector of society was being exposed to a form of radical thought that culminated in the great rallies of the early eighties, rallies that CND were at pains to point out we were not welcome to play at [emphasis added].* By then, contented and even a little smug about the volume of their support, CND felt that our presence at a rally would merely create trouble. They had a point, but nonetheless, it was one that we found galling.

The strategy Crass employed was, in the eponymous words of one of the better known British autonomous magazines of the period, *practical anarchy*. Crass's commitment to an anti-nuclear and anti-militarist society was manifest in the band's consistent strategy of performing only for local activist groups, constructing an informal decentralised grassroots network for (aggressively presented) ideas and cultures of peace. As Rimbaud claims, this probably *did* help introduce a new generation of activists to CND.

INSERT FIGURE TWO HERE SOMEWHERE

Concurrent with Crass (though the band never played there either) the Glastonbury Festival was established—a rather respectable fundraising event when compared with its more edgy, sometimes violent, anti-commercial neighbour, the Stonehenge Free Festival. Glastonbury Festival is often presented in the media as having originated in the 1960s and compared to Woodstock; it is more accurate to observe that it only began to be a successful regular event in the 1980s, when it was known as the CND Festival and raised significant funds for CND. It survives today as a commodified summer pop festival with an alternative ethos, giving all profits to social campaigns such as Greenpeace and WaterAid. Glastonbury has prided itself on its ability to reinvent its musical diet, to move with the pop times. This reinvigoration is important; pop festivals present and celebrate pop music, a transitory, ephemeral youth-oriented cultural form with an inherent generational appeal. Via pop festivals and proto-festival gatherings, the peace movement could open itself up to the next generation of activists simply by updating the headlining acts.

INSERT FIGURE THREE HERE SOMEWHERE

But, despite its successful fund- and profile-raising for the campaign throughout the 1980s (festival organiser and dairy farmer Michael Eavis indicates that one million pounds was raised by the event for the CND during these years), Glastonbury too produced concern within CND's elders. Tony Myers of national CND recalls that 'there were dissenting voices within the organisation, there was an element seeing all the press coverage about hippies and drugs, and seriously wondering whether CND was benefiting from being connected with that kind of thing'.

A similar antagonism arose in response to the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp. In *Disarming Patriarchy* Sasha Roseneil quotes from an internal CND report: 'The Greenham women are burying a potentially popular cause in a tide of criticism levelled against them on personal grounds. They are discrediting a cause to which they profess allegiance'. Once more, there is an identifiable trajectory of resistance or at least ambivalence within CND to some of the social and cultural innovations it was associated with. Indeed, the discomfort with the very formations of alternative culture CND helped birth, and expressed by some of its constituency, is evident across the decades of its existence.

INSERRT FIGURE FOUR HERE SOMEWHERE

As culture breaks loose from the constraints of social movement—privileging contumacy and autonomy over political compromise (or indeed over success)—we may have met the limit case of the social movement's engagement with culture. I wonder, though, whether it also confirms for us the continuing, profoundly disruptive potential of the carnival as a culture of protest that will not be contained. In *The Politics of Performance*, Baz Kershaw argues that:

Above all, carnival inverts the everyday, workaday world of rules, regulations and laws, challenging the hierarchies of normality in a counterhegemonic, satirical and sartorial parody of power. And, like the counter-culture, carnival appears to be totally anti-structural, opposed to all order, anarchic and liberating in its wilful refusal of systematic governance... [But if] the carnivalesque is to contribute effectively to progressive change then it must be organisationally grounded in relation to wider cultural/philosophical movements. I would argue that in fact this happened in the successive counter-cultures in post-war Britain, particularly in their evolution of forms of celebratory protest, in such activities as, for example, anti-war marches, free rock-concerts, the Greenham Common fence decorations, Rock Against Racism.

In such a reading, the pursuit and presentation of pleasure can be read as wilful acts—in defiance carnival ignores, opposes, and perhaps even denies the possibility of (nuclear) destruction. As Michel Maffesoli notes in a related context, such 'dances of possession and other forms of popular effervescence ... are all things that contravene the spirit of seriousness' of authority. Carnival is space-time, performance in action. This is not simply the familiar Bakhtinian point about sacred time, in which carnival for a limited period interrupts and inverts normal hierarchical social relations (which are later reinstated). In '[t]he paroxysm of the carnival, its exacerbated theatricality and tactileness', in political and cultural opposition to the literally *regimented* order of the nuclear state and its military forces, a still greater critical contrast is proposed. Simply by refusing to behave, to conform to protestors' nominal social expectations, such 'effervescent forms [become] heated moments of history'.

I have been concerned here with reinterpreting a political campaign organisation in order to illustrate the extent to which its contribution, its *success* even—and I do appreciate the problematic of employing such a naively judgemental term in social movement discourse ©—is precisely in the socio-cultural realm and not in the political. From this I have moved outwards to touch on important questions for cultural politics seen from the vantage of social movements. Interestingly, some of the more straightforwardly culturalist phenomena I have touched on are ignored or sidelined not only by a sometimes seemingly embarrassed CND. *The (once) radical discipline of cultural studies does not know what to do with them, and*

indeed has in fact rarely discussed them. Of course there have many lacunae in the development of the discipline—hetero-masculinity, whiteness, elderliness, for a very few examples—and I have no wish to rehearse those familiar arguments here. But cultural studies has displayed an enormous tendency to privilege analysis of the spectacular in subculture and music, *ignoring these varyingly militant cultural interventions in British social movements.* As I have shown in this short trawl, these interventions range from the trad jazz accompanying Aldermaston marchers of the 1950s to the aggressively pacifist post-punks at Crass peace benefit gigs of the 1980s. The heavy weight of the Marxist bloc(k) in cultural criticism, with its frequent distrust and dismissal of anarchism, may bear some responsibility for ignoring them. To this we may add the successful anti-commercialism, fanatical purism, and wilful self-marginalisation of some of the key cultural workers, from New Orleans-style trumpeter Ken Colyer to sober shouters Crass (I am afraid I greatly enjoy this curious conjunction). Here the attitudinal authenticity professed by some British subcultures seems effectively to have written them out of the story for a while. The usually transient cultural pleasures and practices of festival and gathering which lead to the fluid, effervescent politics of carnival have also contributed to their neglect, simply by virtue of the perceived difficulty of researching and writing about such phenomena.

How, then, ought we to understand the success of the socio-cultural innovations that emerge from CND? With CND there emerged *both* what Richard Flacks would recognise as a *resistance movement*, with its defining ‘demands for social reform ... that will prevent or mitigate the threats that sparked the movement in the first place’, *and* the beginnings of a *liberation movement*, ‘aris[ing] not from the need to defend a threatened way of life but out of a desire to establish a new way’. As Flacks explains the difference:

resistance movements depend for their effectiveness on the mobilization of action that requires participants to *stop* everyday routines and *step outside* of their daily lives.... [L]iberation movements ... exercise their power more fundamentally by fostering historical action *within the framework of everyday roles and relationships.*

Aldermaston, Crass, Greenham, and possibly Glastonbury too—at least within the alternative festival circuit of the 1980s, favoured by New Travellers and libertarians—opened up the possibility of liberation, of a more critical and radical identity and grouping. In part, it was the generous gift of CND to make available the space for subcultural and social innovation, even if its more respectable members or committee chairs or regional branch secretaries were shaking their heads with dismay at what the curiously powerful cultural bomb they had unleashed was releasing.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Maran McKay snr., my mother, for help regarding Greenham.

Picture credits: Figure 1: taken from Jeff Nuttall’s personal archive, and used with permission. Figures 2, 3, and 4 are taken from the author’s collection.

Recommended Readings:

Dworkin, Dennis. 1997. *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the New Left, and the Origins of Cultural Studies.* London: Duke University Press.

Flacks, Richard. 1988. *Making History: The American Left and the American Mind.* New York: Columbia University Press.

- Kershaw, Baz. 1992. *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention*. London: Routledge, 1999.
- Maffesoli, Michel. 1996. *The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society*. Trans. Don Smith. London: Sage.
- Martin, Greg. 2002. 'Conceptualizing subcultural politics in subcultural and social movement studies.' *Social Movement Studies: Journal of Social, Cultural and Political Protest*. 1:1 (April 2002): 73-88.
- McKay, George. 1996. *Senseless Acts of Beauty: Cultures of Resistance since the Sixties*. London: Verso.
- . 1999. 'I'm so bored with the USA: the punk in cyberpunk'. In Roger Sabin (ed.), *Punk Rock: So What? The Cultural Legacy of Punk*, London: Routledge, 49-67.
- . 2000. *Glastonbury: A Very English Fair*. London: Gollancz.
- . 2003. "'Just a closer walk with thee': New Orleans-style jazz and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in 1950s Britain'. *Popular Music*. 22: 3 (Autumn 2003), 261-281.
- . 2004. "'Unsafe things like youth and jazz': Beaulieu Jazz Festivals (1956-61), and the origins of pop festival culture in Britain'. In Andy Bennett (ed.), *Remembering Woodstock*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 90-110.
- Nuttall, Jeff. 1968. *Bomb Culture*. London: MacGibbon and Kee.
- Rimbaud, Penny. 1998. *Shibboleth: My Revolting Life*. Edinburgh: AK Press.
- Roseneil, Sasha. 1995. *Disarming Patriarchy: Feminism and Political Action at Greenham*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Savage, Jon. 1991. *England's Dreaming: Sex Pistols and Punk Rock*. London: Faber.
- Welsh, Ian. 2000. *Mobilizing Modernity: The Nuclear Moment*. London: Routledge.
- Widgery, David. 1976. *The Left in Britain, 1956-68*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.