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Review of Felix Fuhg, *London's Working-Class Youth and the Making of Post-Victorian Britain, 1958–1971* / Anna Braun, *Von 'Art School' bis 'Underground Club': Räume der Interaktion von visueller Kunst und Popmusik im London der 1960er Jahre*

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FELIX FUHG, *London's Working-Class Youth and the Making of Post-Victorian Britain, 1958–1971*, Palgrave Studies in the History of Subcultures and Popular Music (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), xiii + 441 pp. ISBN 978 3 030 68967 4. £109.99

ANNA BRAUN, *Von 'Art School' bis 'Underground Club': Räume der Interaktion von visueller Kunst und Popmusik im London der 1960er Jahre*, Populäre Kultur und Musik, 31 (Münster: Waxmann Verlag, 2021), 512 pp. ISBN 978 3 830 94239 9. €49.90

Much writing on contemporary British history follows a generational logic. Each decade tends to be revisited thirty years after its passing: the 1960s were popular at the turn of the millennium, the 1970s in the late noughties and early 2010s, and the 1980s in the later 2010s and early 2020s.<sup>1</sup> The two monographs by Felix Fuhg and Anna Braun demonstrate that it need not be thus. Much can still be learned from revisiting the once-iconic 1960s, the decade when the post-war social democratic settlement brought forth remarkable currents of cultural renewal. Indeed, the current debate about the long shadows of Britain's imperial past makes a critical re-evaluation of the years when Britain self-consciously embraced a post-imperial conception of national identity especially timely.<sup>2</sup> Both monographs are based on Ph.D. theses that were successfully defended at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. In the attention to empirical detail, the level of methodological reflection, and, not least, the choice of subject matter outside the authors' immediate lived experience, the studies serve as a welcome reminder of what is good about the German higher education system. Their considerable length will come as a surprise to some British readers; and sadly, Braun's study will, in all likelihood, remain inaccessible to most scholars of a historiographical field that,

<sup>1</sup> Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, c.1958–c.1974* (London, 1998); Lawrence Black, Hugh Pemberton, and Pat Thane (eds.), *Reassessing 1970s Britain* (Manchester, 2013); Matthew Hilton, Chris Moores, and Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite (eds.), *New Times Revisited: Britain in the 1980s*, special issue of *Contemporary British History*, 31/2 (2017).

<sup>2</sup> Erik Linstrum, Stuart Ward, Vanessa Ogle, et al., 'Decolonizing Britain: An Exchange', *Twentieth Century British History*, 33/2 (2022), 274–303.

global pretensions notwithstanding, has largely closed itself off from any impulses published in languages other than English.

British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan's famous 'Wind of Change' speech in 1960 and Winston Churchill's death in 1965 serve as the starting points for Fuhg's wide-ranging and innovative study. At its most basic, his book is interested in the reconceptualization of Britain's national identity after the loss of empire. Taking his cues from the 'spatial turn', Fuhg fuses urban and cultural history. The long 1960s, he argues, mark the moment when Britain left behind the trappings of its imperial past and embraced a 'post-Victorian' national identity. Nostalgia for a lost past was replaced by the joy of living in the 'swinging' present; a culture of deference gave way to the celebration of irreverence and self-actualization. This change was driven by the urban working class, and in particular its youthful subcultural sections. In emphasizing the agency of 'ordinary' men and women, Fuhg offers a welcome corrective to some recent accounts that tend to view working-class culture as a repository of crass stereotyping and obsolete social values. As Fuhg reminds us, the process of transformation was not without its contradictions, nor was it completed by the end of the decade. The embrace of the future entailed a reconfiguration of the past: the 1960s were, to use Fuhg's term, 'a liminal period' in which the old and the new existed side by side (p. 7).

The book takes popular culture seriously, and although the author distances himself from the Birmingham School of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the introduction, his approach is clearly indebted to the centre's pioneering work (pp. 10–12). (Sub)cultural practices – the musical tastes, sense of style, and transgressive leisure activities embraced by some working-class youths – may not count as 'rituals of resistance', as Stuart Hall and collaborators posited in the 1970s.<sup>3</sup> But they clearly carried meaning, driving as well as reflecting broader socio-cultural changes. In the process, London, the former imperial centre, was reinvented as the capital of pop. In eight substantive chapters, divided into four parts labelled 'Society', 'City', 'Pop', and 'Space' respectively, Fuhg traces these changes with diligence and care.

<sup>3</sup> Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (eds.), *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, 2nd edn (London, 2006; 1st pub. 1975).

Indeed, the book's great strength lies in the close attention that it pays to the concrete spaces in which cultural change manifested itself: the workplace, the estate, the street, the bar, and the club. The author's re-evaluation of the post-war housing estate, often taken as exemplifying the erosion of 'traditional' community values, is particularly welcome. As Fuhg demonstrates, modern housing estates could function as places of belonging just as much as the back-to-back terraces that they had replaced. The same goes for the neighbourhood street. Despite the advent of television, Fuhg shows, the street retained an important place in the mental cartography of working-class youths.

Some aspects of the study could have been developed further. There is, first of all, the problem of copy editing. The book features some high quality black and white illustrations. Unfortunately, however, neither the publisher nor the series editors appear to have deemed it necessary to proofread the manuscript. This is a shame because some sentence constructions and turns of phrase will strike many readers as rather unidiomatic. Second, and perhaps more importantly, some of the study's central concepts are introduced without careful definition. This applies above all to the use of the term 'Victorian'. Can the Britain of the 1950s, or for that matter, of the 1920s and 1930s, really be classified as Victorian, as the study implies? If so, what was the essence of Victorianism? Was it the empire? Was it a culture of deference? Finally, the study makes frequent references to famous youth subcultures such as the Teddy boys, the mods, and the skinheads. But despite their importance for the overall narrative, their various practices and modes of conduct are treated rather cursorily.

These caveats notwithstanding, Fuhg's overall argument holds up well. It is usefully summarized in the conclusion. In the 1960s, British national identity was remade by urban working-class youths whose modes of sociability and pop cultural tastes radiated from London across urban Britain, the Western world, and beyond. 'The cultural awakening of the capital, driven and pushed by working-class youth, reinvented Britain as a country that no longer ruled the world in politics but the world of fashion, music and lifestyle', as Fuhg concludes (p. 427). The book demonstrates that culture can serve as a driver of change, as well as a reflector. More broadly, it illustrates that much

can be gained from taking seriously the links between the spatial, the social, and the cultural. In probing the cross-currents between the post-imperial and the youth cultural, the book opens up a pathway for much needed further research.

Where Fuhg uses a broad brush to paint a picture of post-Victorian Britain with bold strokes, Anna Braun deploys a fine pencil to sketch out the nodal points that made London swing. Her study, a revised Ph.D. thesis in art history, is no less fascinating for that. Like Fuhg, Braun is interested in the relationship between social change, culture, and space. Her central argument is that to understand London's rise as Europe's, and the world's, pop cultural capital in the 1960s, we need to take into consideration the impact of the visual arts on a generation of young pop musicians. Braun takes iconic moments of 1960s pop culture – Pete Townshend's onstage guitar destruction; the Beatles' release of the *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* album; the light shows of Soft Machine and Pink Floyd – as starting points for her exploration of the spaces that made this interaction possible. The art school, the art gallery, and the music club form the basis of the three substantive chapters that comprise her study.

Chapter one shows how art schools functioned as an environment in which aspiring musicians, often from working-class backgrounds, could develop their creativity, meet fellow musicians, and be inspired by the latest developments in the visual arts. The list of famous British musicians who attended art school in the post-war decades is long and impressive indeed, including Ronnie Wood and Keith Richards (the Rolling Stones), John Lennon (the Beatles), Pete Townshend (the Who), Freddie Mercury (Queen), Cat Stevens, Eric Clapton, Brian Eno, and Joe Strummer (the Clash), amongst others (p. 53, n. 95). As Braun shows, this development was based on the reform of the art school curriculum in the 1950s, with a move away from the teaching of artisanal skills in canonical subject areas and a prioritizing of free expression, intuition, and creativity. In particular, the introduction of the 'basic design' foundation course was crucial. It did not matter that music was not even taught as a subject. What mattered was that the art schools offered an environment in which experimentation and creative expression were valued over technical aptitude. Here, as elsewhere, the cultural revolution of the 1960s took inspiration from the

European avant-garde of the interwar years, in particular the Weimar Bauhaus and Dadaism, as Braun reminds us.

Chapter two likewise traces cultural innovation back to spaces, showing how a new type of gallery fostered social interaction and cultural exchange. Galleries such as Robert Fraser Gallery at 69 Duke Street and Indica Gallery at 6 Mason's Yard were not so much places where art was exhibited for commercial trading. Rather, they functioned as meeting places for the cultural avant-garde. It was here that art of a new kind, including everyday objects and installations—'whatever you put a frame around' (p. 258)—was shown. It was at these galleries that visual artists such as Mark Boyle, David Medalla, and Lourdes Castro staged famous (and controversial) exhibitions and creative fusion occurred between pop musicians and visual artists. Creative fusion also stood at the centre of the music clubs and art labs which form the subject matter of chapter three. As Braun demonstrates in two illuminating case studies of the UFO Club and the Drury Lane Arts Lab, space was reconfigured to create a laboratory for artistic creation and expression.

Braun's study is meticulously researched and engagingly written. It offers a persuasive overall argument while making many fine observations along the way. Her recreation, in great detail, of the artistic partnership between performance artist Yoko Ono and Beatles star John Lennon offers a case in point. Ono was virtually unknown in the UK when John Dunbar, the founder of Indica Gallery, agreed to put on her exhibition 'Unfinished Paintings and Objects' in November 1966. The colour white dominated the exhibition; most exhibits were unfinished in the sense that they contained instructions for the audience to participate in artistic creation. In one installation, nails and a hammer were placed next to a white painting; in another, called *Add Colour Painting*, a brush and paint pots were placed next to a white frame. John Lennon, who was given a private tour of the exhibition, was particularly impressed by the installation *an answer without a question*, which invited visitors to climb up a ladder to look at a white painting that had been fixed to the ceiling. Only with the help of a looking glass did the word 'yes', written in tiny black letters, become visible (pp. 279-97). As Braun demonstrates, impact did not depend on longevity. Indeed, many of the artistic spaces that are examined in the study were exceptionally short-lived. Indica Books and Gallery opened in late November 1965

and closed less than two years later, in September 1967. The UFO Club lasted less than a year, from December 1966 to October 1967. Yet, as was the case with Yoko Ono and John Lennon, the artistic and personal relationships that were formed in these places would reverberate in popular culture for decades to come.

Braun's study is based on a broad range of archival material, much of it uncatalogued. The archival sources are handled with diligence and care. They are complemented by interviews that the author conducted with eyewitnesses and visual artists, although not musicians, in the early 2010s. Braun's difficulty in getting access to musicians points to a certain imbalance of power in the exchanges and partnerships that were formed in the 1960s. Whereas musicians such as Pete Townshend, Paul McCartney, and John Lennon were propelled to superstardom, many visual artists remained relatively obscure. These imbalances are acknowledged but not taken as a cue for exploring what might be called the darker side of the 1960s. Following the oral testimony, the underground scene is presented as an exceptionally creative milieu in which transgressions such as excessive drug use and sexual liberties became the natural bedfellows of the creative process. In such a perspective, more ambivalent aspects of the scene, such as, for example, the self-destructive dimension of substance abuse, are left unexplored. Potential gender and race imbalances, as illustrated by the biographical sketches in a contemporary newspaper article, 'Who's Who in the Underground', also remain outside the study's analytical gaze (pp. 338–9).

Fuhg and Brown have written innovative studies that make a significant contribution to the existing historiography. They demonstrate that the spatial turn helps to enhance our understanding of the 1960s and, more broadly, of the conditions in which cultural innovation thrives. In doing so, both studies hold lessons for anyone who is interested in, and concerned about, the future of the creative arts in the climate of fiscal austerity and puritanical righteousness that seems to define our present. They deserve a wide readership.

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