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RESEARCH ARTICLE

"Move Your Feet to the Cable Street Beat": The Cultural Praxis of Anti-Fascist Action, 1988 – 2000

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ABSTRACT: The historiography of antifascism has grown substantially recently. However, scholarly attention has been disproportionally focused on the street-based and violent strategies of the movement. High-profile conflicts between antifascists and their far-right opponents have stimulated a high volume of research regarding the causes and results of their radicalization. Yet antifascism is a vast and complex movement that employs a wide variety of different strategies, the majority of which are non-violent. To address this gap in the literature, and begin to reveal the multifaceted nature of antifascist organizing, this article will explore the movement's 'cultural praxis'. That is, the way that antifascists use culture to construct a space in which they can effectively engage with the public as well as their efforts to prevent the far right from constructing such a space. Specifically, the efforts of the British militant antifascist organization Anti-Fascist Action to strategically use music and music scenes in their conflict with the far right between 1988 and 2000 shall be examined.

KEYWORDS: antifascism, fascism, music, subcultures, far right

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1. Introduction

The literature on antifascism has blossomed of late, as emerging historiographical approaches have revealed important aspects of the movement. Recent studies have investigated the transnational nature of the movement, its complex relationship with numerous other ideologies like feminism and conservatism, and how the history of antifascism is used for political capital in contemporary public debates (see e.g. García, Yusta, Tabet, and Clímaco 2016; Brask. n, Copsey, and Lundin 2019; Braskén, Copsey, and Featherstone 2021). However, in part due to increasing numbers of violent clashes between antifascists and their political foes, such as the 2017

Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville, much current scholarly attention is focused on the confrontational aspects of antifascist groups' activities (see e.g. Vysotsky 2020; Copsey and Merrill 2021). Employing the established conceptual distinction between "moderate" and "militant" antifascism, studies often attempt to better understand the violent strategies of those operating in the latter category.[1]

To be sure, these analyses have shed much-needed light on this often-clandestine wing of the antifascist movement. However, this focus on their more radical activities has left important areas of their "repertoires of contention" (Tilly and Tarrow 2015, 13) in the dark. There is a risk that the picture being drawn of these activists is in fact a caricature: their violence exaggerated while other important areas of their programme are reduced or ignored. Even amongst the most militant of antifascist groups, violence has only ever been one tool from a deep toolbox (Bray 2017, 167-206; Vysotsky 2020, 71). This article, then, will offer a corrective to this mischaracterising of militant antifascism by presenting an account of important non-violent strategies in the movement's contentious repertoire. Specifically, an analysis shall be presented of the efforts by the British militant antifascist organisation Anti-Fascist Action (AFA) to use music in their struggle against the far right throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

In so doing, the article will begin to explore what is being described here as "antifascist cultural praxis"; that is, the ways in which the movement employs culture to advance its cause. Specifically, this article argues that antifascist cultural praxis had two key elements vis-à-vis music. Firstly, they utilised songs, concerts, records, and music subcultures to construct a space in which the movement could engage with the public to generate resources and supporters. Secondly, they worked to prevent the far right from employing music to achieve the same results. Antifascists' links with music subcultures, and music in general, have been noted by scholars (see Daniel 2020, 56-74). However, despite a growing body of work on the subject, the full nature of this relationship has not been explored. Moreover, militant antifascists are often excluded from these analyses altogether. This is despite many of these groups often expending as much energy on activities oriented to music as they have physically resisting the far right. Indeed, it could reasonably be argued that this area of their strategy was as significant an arrow in AFA's quiver as the violent direct action for which they are well known.

A number of historical studies of AFA have touched on their cultural engagements. Dave Hann, Steve Tilzey, and Sean Birchall have all written books that provide accounts of AFA's activities from the perspectives of the activists. Hann (2013, 347) observes that AFA's "[i]nvolvement in a Do-It Yourself music scene contributed to AFA as a broad front movement and helped create the social bonds that can sustain activists committed to physical resistance". In Hann and Tilzey's study (2003, 120) they describe Hann's involvement in Red Action, and by extension AFA, as being provoked by the far right's attacks on the punk scene in the eighties. Birchall (2010) provides a more focused treatment of AFA's cultural efforts, and devotes several pages to describing the militant group's musical projects.

Alex Carter, Nigel Copsey, and Mark Hayes and Paul Aylward have all also provided academic analyses of AFA. Hayes and Aylward (2000) argue that AFA's cultural projects "suggest that AFA is more ideologically complex, tactically sophisticated and mission-committed than conventional descriptive accounts have acknowledged". These aspects of AFA's strategy are also explored in Carter's study of cumulative extremism (2020) and Copsey's history of antifascism in Britain (2017). Nevertheless, amongst both activist and academic accounts, AFA's cultural praxis is overshadowed by its more militant activities. As the names of the activists' books—*No Retreat*, *Beating the Fascists*, and *Physical Resistance*—suggest, these writers are primarily concerned with detailing AFA's direct action strategies. Similarly, the academic accounts place AFA in the "militant" side of the moderate/militant dichotomy, and focus mainly on detailing the impact and development

[1] This theoretical framework for assessing antifascism was first introduced in Copsey (2017 [2000]).

of their physical-force protest repertoire. The cultural dimensions of AFA's work are only ever a minor element of these analyses. This article, then, will provide the first focused account of AFA's cultural efforts.

In exploring the parameters of AFA's cultural praxis, this article will employ Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow's concept of "contentious politics". This theoretical framework enables analysts to better understand "interactions in which actors make claims bearing on someone else's interests, leading to coordinated efforts on behalf of shared interests or programs" (Tilly and Tarrow 2015, 7). Importantly, the framework provides conceptual tools that allow for a nuanced understanding of the development of new strategies by social movements, such as what Tilly and Tarrow call "contentious repertoires": "inherited forms of collective action" (Tilly and Tarrow 2015, 7), "arrays of performances that are currently known and available within some set of political actors" (Tilly and Tarrow 2015, 14). Specifically, they draw our attention to various factors that either constrain or encourage tactical innovation, such as shifts in political opportunity structures or the development of new constituencies of support. Additionally, the article will draw from the wider literature of social movement theory and subcultures.

In terms of sources, this article will be using the newspapers and magazines put out by the militant antifascists. These are *Red Action Bulletin*, the paper of Red Action (RA); *Fighting Talk*, the magazine of AFA; and *Cable Street Beat Review*, the magazine of Cable Street Beat. A range of other sources will also be employed. These will primarily be drawn from the Northampton Searchlight Archive, which contains a wealth of material related to fascist and antifascist activities in the period under review, as well as magazines from other political groups active in the antifascist movement during this period such as *Searchlight* and *Campaign Against Racism and Fascism*. Finally, the article will use national and local newspapers.

2. Context

In the mid-1980s, the British far right was moribund, following the National Front's (NF) disastrous 1979 electoral performance. Yet while this was a period of grim electoral prospects and paralysing infighting for the far right, it was also the point at which the milieu experienced a "cultural turn" (Worley and Copsey 2016, 28). This was largely provoked by the earlier cultural victories of the left. During the second half of the 1970s, the Anti-Nazi League (ANL) and its sister organisation Rock Against Racism (RAR) had enjoyed heady successes by combining music with politics. These antifascist groups experienced unprecedented popularity, in large part due to their close association with the emerging punk scene (Worley and Copsey 2016, 40). New and exciting bands such as The Clash and the Tom Robinson Band enthusiastically endorsed these groups, encouraging young people to get involved and to oppose the NF. Enormous numbers of British youth heeded these calls, with major ANL and RAR events being attended by crowds of 70,000-100,000 people (Renton 2006, 38).

In response to these developments, and to try to capitalise on the aggressive and nihilistic nature of the new punk scene, the NF formed Rock Against Communism (RAC) in 1979. This first foray into music scenes for the UK far right generated little interest (Worley and Copsey 2016, 27). However, a relaunched RAC in 1983 demonstrated more promise, with hundreds of teenagers attending concerts by "white power" punk bands such as Skrewdriver and the Ovaltinees (Shaffer 2017, 112). Skrewdriver in particular became extremely popular amongst the transnational neo-Nazi skinhead movement. The NF capitalised on this growing international interest in the UK "white power" punk scene by starting the "White Noise Club" in 1986 to distribute records and tapes throughout Europe (Shaffer 2017, 117). Ian Stuart Donaldson, lead singer of Skrewdriver, later split away from the NF following disputes over money and founded the Blood & Honour (B&H) network in 1987. B&H operated as a distribution channel for "white power" records and merchandise as well as organising concerts. It soon eclipsed the White Noise Club in popularity, gaining supporters and developing branches in

the USA and "nearly every European country in the 1990s" (Shaffer 2017, 129 f.). These cultural successes by the far right motivated militant British antifascists to attempt similar strategies.

Across the 1980s and 1990s, the most significant militant antifascist organisation in the UK was Anti-Fascist Action. Founded on 28 July 1985, AFA was a national organisation that eventually established numerous branches throughout Britain (Carter 2020). AFA was a militant antifascist organisation from the outset. One of its original "statement of aims" was to "oppose racism and fascism physically, on the streets, and ideologically" (Birchall 2010, 55). Nevertheless, throughout its existence between 1985 and the early 2000s, AFA, and its various constituent groups such as Red Action (RA) and the Direct Action Movement, were as dedicated to their cultural strategies as they were to physical force direct action.

3. Creating Cultural Space for the Antifascist Movement

3.1 Creation of Cable Street Beat

In 1988, the growth of far-right music networks such as the then-nascent B&H stimulated the first major manifestation of the militant antifascists' cultural praxis: the formation of the music organisation Cable Street Beat (CSB), "a new independent organisation that has been set up [...] to oppose the small but growing openly nazi music scene" (Red Action Bulletin 1988, 3). Here the antifascists were utilising the repertoire of contention that had been pioneered the previous decade by RAR activists. CSB drew the conclusion that RAR's innovative approach to propaganda and events had successfully "changed people's consciousness" leading to a "'better atmosphere' about the subject of racism in music" and wanted to emulate this (Cable Street Beat Review 1988a, 2).

The idea to form a new musical antifascist organisation seems to have been first raised shortly after AFA had been established. At the AFA National Conference on 22 February, 1986, the Bradford AFA branch and Manchester Socialist Federation put forward a motion that "AFA will approach sympathetic people in the music and music press industries with a view to launching a new version of Rock Against Racism" (Bradford Anti-Fascist Action 1986, 1). Two years later the militants had founded CSB as a network of antifascist activists and bands who arranged concerts and published the *Cable Street Beat Review* magazine.

CSB held their first major event on 8 October 1988, at London's Electric Ballroom. This was a memorial gig for the 52nd anniversary of the famous Battle of Cable Street in 1936 when thousands of antifascists had prevented the British Union of Fascists (BUF) from marching through London's East End (Copsey 2017, 51). A thousand people were reported by CSB as attending the gig to watch The Newtown Neurotics, The Men They Couldn't Hang, and the poet Attila the Stockbroker. Importantly, the event also included a speech from Solly Kaye, an antifascist veteran of the actual Battle of Cable Street. He used the historic example of interwar fascism to highlight the importance of the battleground of music and popular culture:

> In spite of Cable Street, in spite of the war, in spite of the suffering caused to millions by fascism, racism exists and is widespread in our society today ... Now it's not marches or street meetings - it's songs and it's slogans and it's poison put into the minds of young people (Cable Street Beat Review 1988b, 10)

As well as the Battle of Cable Street memorial gig, CSB arranged two benefit concerts for antifascists that had been arrested at a counter-demo for an NF event. They also organised gigs in Brixton, Southport, and Brent (Cable Street Beat Review 1988c, 2). Across 1989, CSB's "Dance and Defend" saw bands including

Snuff, Anhrefn, McDermott's Two Hours, the Blaggers, and the Angelic Upstarts playing concerts in Manchester, Liverpool, Harlow, Hatfield, London, and Brighton (Cable Street Beat n.d.).

In their study of White Power music, Corte and Edwards (2008, 17) identified "three specific roles" that it "plays in supporting racist movements: recruiting adherents, cultivating a collective identity, and obtaining financial resources". These were observations shared by the militant antifascists. AFA noted that the "danger that an organisation like Blood & Honour (B&H) poses is not just the creation of a nazi youth movement and culture, but also its ability to raise serious amounts of money" (Fighting Talk 1995, 14). Broadly speaking, then, CSB was designed to achieve similar results for the antifascists.

CSB's concerts were often aimed at raising funds for specific reasons. For example, CSB stated that the Dance and Defend tour raised around £200 for antifascists arrested while fighting the NF. They described this as "practical support for practical action" (Cable Street Beat Review 1989a, 3). Indeed, this pragmatic approach to generating resources for specific movement goals was one of the chief ways that CSB differentiated itself from RAR. Comparing themselves to the latter organisation, they noted that whilst "there are obvious similarities, as Rock Against Racism has been a major influence on us, CSB differs in that it tries to make its gigs as practical as possible, for example, raising fines for anti-fascists arrested on demos" (Cable Street Beat Review 1989b, 2). Behind the scenes, AFA was indeed working to ensure that CSB was effectively supporting antifascists who fell afoul of the law. An internal AFA discussion paper from this period noted that they did not yet "keep adequate track of those arrested on marches etc" (Anti-Fascist Action n.d., 1). Accordingly, it was proposed that they needed a dedicated "Defence / Legal Organiser" to oversee this area, which would include having to "liaise with Cable St Beat" to support arrested antifascists (Anti-Fascist Action n.d., 1).

CSB were equally as interested in gaining further recruits. Corte and Edwards (2008, 6) have described how "White Power music concerts" combined music, "ideology and political persuasion ... in a way calculated to recruit new generations of youth". Specifically, this was achieved by interspersing exciting music with short political speeches from movement leaders. A similar approach was adopted by CSB. Members of AFA gave talks at the concerts, and literature was distributed. A CSB activist observed at the time, "the gigs hopefully were more than just another gig with the money happening to go to some cause. At every gig we had an anti-fascist book stall and a speaker on the stage explaining what the gig was all about" (Cable Street Beat Review 1989a, 3).

To a certain extent, CSB and AFA also attempted to cultivate a collective identity by framing their activities as belonging to the same militant antifascist tradition that violently opposed fascists in the 1930s and 1940s. Indeed, Red Action acknowledged as much, stating that "[a]s we say in our propaganda, we want to recreate the spirit of militant anti-fascism that prevented the Blackshirts marching through the East End on 4th October 1936" (Red Action Bulletin 1988, 3). This is demonstrated by the Cable Street Beat name itself: by linking their organisation to this celebrated antifascist triumph, CSB was communicating their historic links with militant antifascism. The song "Ghosts of Cable Street" by the English folk punk band The Men They Couldn't Hang was even adopted as a CSB and "AFA 'anthem'" (Fighting Talk 1995a, 22). The lyrics of this song, which pay tribute to the antifascists who violently opposed the BUF in 1936 while making the case for the need to continue their tradition, were printed on CSB leaflets and handed out at events (Cable Street Beat Review 1988d, 10). This was an attempt to unify people, by encouraging a collective identity to cohere around a shared history and culture.

A fourth role that CSB played in supporting the antifascist movement, and an area where the antifascists introduced the most innovation to the repertoire developed by RAR in the 1970s, was in establishing relationships with antifascists from different countries. By the mid-1980s, antifascists in the UK were feeling increasingly concerned about a burgeoning international network of far-right groups. It was also recognised that B&H played a large part in forging these transnational links. In 1991, *Campaign Against Racism and*

Fascism reported on Skrewdriver and B&H members supporting "the neo-nazi German Alternative Movement" in Cottbus, Germany, and on reports of "German neo-nazis" being active in areas of the UK where B&H had a presence (Campaign Against Racism and Fascism 1991, 11). The same year, *Searchlight* reported that B&H "has been building links with violent nazis across Europe, including the 'Storm' terror gang in Sweden" (Searchlight 1991, 15). AFA and CSB were animated by B&H's successes and worked towards a similar goal themselves. In so doing, CSB was effectively used by the British antifascists to implement several mechanisms of transnational contention.

AFA and CSB began making contact with antifascists in other countries and organised several gigs and tours for British bands in Europe. In 1991, CSB's "Fuel for the Fire" tour saw bands The Blaggers and the Dik Ugly Ensemble play a number of shows around Germany (Fighting Talk 1991, 13). This tour was organised with the help of German leftists. AFA noted that "[i]mportant contacts were made and strengthened, particularly amongst skins of the SHARP scene and also the German section of Class War, who have had individuals attend the AFA mobilisation and pickets" (Fighting Talk 1991, 13). AFA and CSB's forging of these links with their European comrades is an example of what Tilly and Tarrow refer to as the "brokerage of transnational alliances" (Tilly and Tarrow 2015, 199).

The same year, the Angelic Upstarts and the Blaggers ITA accompanied a number of CSB and AFA activists to an international antifascist festival held near Rome. AFA had been invited to speak at the gathering, as had antifascist activists from around Europe. During his speech, the AFA activist made a "call for unity on an international scale based on the principle of fighting fascism on both political and physical levels" (Fighting Talk 1991, 15). The event had around 4,000 attendees, and on the second night of the festival the Angelic Upstarts and the Blaggers ITA performed to the crowd of international antifascists. AFA subsequently noted a hope that "more such international meetings will be held, helping to lay the basis for a broad-based militant anti-fascist network across Europe" (Fighting Talk 1991, 15). Here we can see what Tilly and Tarrow (2015, 199 f.) refer to as "scale shift of contention [...] from the domestic to the international level".

Reflecting on the "anti-fascist gigs in Europe" and "tour of Germany" that "CSB had helped organise", AFA argued that the "extensive international links we have made must be maintained and developed, both to exchange information and where necessary co-ordinate activities" (Anti-Fascist Action 1991a, 6). AFA did indeed maintain these links with their European comrades. By 1993 Leeds AFA was co-authoring a pan-European newsletter with antifascist organisations from 10 countries (Leeds Anti-Fascist Action 1993). AFA later reported being able to mobilise antifascists from countries as far away as "France, Belgium, Malaya, Germany and the Basque country" (Red Action Bulletin 1997, 4) to support their music events. So, through the mechanisms of scale shift and brokering transnational alliances, CSB enabled the antifascists to benefit from "transnational mobilization" (Tilly and Tarrow, 2015, 198).

CSB "lost some of its impetus" once they had scored some key victories against B&H, forcing the latter to operate in a more clandestine manner (Anti-Fascist Action, 1991a, 6). These successes included disrupting B&H's distribution networks (more on which later) and pressuring B&H leader Ian Stuart Donaldson to move out of London. By 1994 CSB was wound down, suggesting a unique potential pitfall facing counter-movements. Social movement theorists have observed that a decisive victory by a movement can lead to the end of its counter-movement (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996). However, the case of CSB demonstrates that a decisive victory by a counter-movement can also lead to their own demise — as they have removed their own *raison d'etre*.

3.2 Subcultural engagement: punk and two-tone

Although Cable Street Beat was wound down, AFA's successes with this project proved "that politics and music could work together encouraging people to get involved" (Fighting Talk 1998, 14). Accordingly, antifascist cultural praxis remained a cornerstone of their strategy. Many AFA branches were keen to arrange music events to mobilise more supporters, generate funds, and raise their profile within music scenes. The scenes in which AFA was most active, and successful, were punk and two-tone.

Punk had been something of a battleground between the left and right since its very emergence in 1976. As Matthew Worley observes, punk was "understood by sections of the far left and the far right as an expression of youthful—primarily working-class—revolt. ... For the left and right, it affirmed culture as a site of political struggle" (Worley 2012, 16). Although in the punk scene the "vast majority resisted and rejected the substance of the fascist message" (Worley 2012, 11), the far right had some success in setting up its own "self-contained micro scene" (Worley and Copsey 2016, 40). By the 1990s this was largely structured around B&H, and focused primarily on the Oi! music scene and associated skinhead subculture, a subculture closely associated with punk.

This became an area of bitter rivalry between the far right and antifascists. As Brown (2004, 158) posits, a "schism developed between – on the one hand – right-wing skins … and – on the other – left-wing or "unpolitical" skins … The conflict between the two sides in this debate became a struggle to define the essence of the [skinhead] subculture". Indeed, *Searchlight* observed at the time that "[t]hose skinhead bands who broke away from the racism of [B&H's] camp ... were physically attacked on and off the stage by [far-right] thugs" (Searchlight 1988a, 3). Leeds AFA similarly noted that "[s]kinhead music (mainly Oi!) was hijacked by skins who were into Nazi politics and letting their boots do the talking", although adding that "It's worth remembering: not all skinheads are nazis, and not all nazis are skinheads" (Attitude 1993, 3).

In the first issue of their magazine *Fighting Talk*, AFA argued that not enough was being done by those in the skinhead subculture to combat the encroachment of the far right into the scene. AFA decided to intervene directly by developing strong relationships with a number of left-wing Oi! bands such as the Angelic Upstarts, the Blaggers ITA, Red London and Red Alert (Fighting Talk 1991, 13). Thomas "Mensi" Mensforth, lead singer of the Angelic Upstarts, even acted as AFA's spokesperson in a documentary that they produced for the BBC (The Guardian 1992, 64). AFA also made connections with skinheads in other countries, inviting bands like the Stage Bottles from Germany and the Pride from Belgium to play anti-fascist Oi! gigs in Britain (Red Action Bulletin 1997, 3). These connections allowed AFA to help foster an explicitly antifascist Oi! scene. They also tried to ensure that antifascist Oi! gigs were well protected by AFA stewards, which gave the antifascist Oi! scene room to continue growing.

AFA utilised the relationships they developed with these bands to offer antifascist alternatives to the far right's contributions to the Oi! scene. For example, in November 1996, they held an "Oi Against Fascism" event in London (Red Action Bulletin 1997, 4). The concert included sets from the Welsh band The Oppressed and the Stage Bottles. As AFA described at the time, this "provided the sort of alternative to Blood and Honour that is needed" (Fighting Talk 1996b, 5). In 1995 they even produced a record for The Oppressed, their "Fuck Fascism!" EP. All proceeds for this record were given to AFA.

AFA also forged connections with bands in the other music genre prominent in the skinhead scene: ska. In particular, they focused on the late-1970s two-tone sub-genre of ska. This scene had a much less complicated relationship with the anti-racist and antifascist movements than Oi! did. Indeed, the multiracial genre was heavily informed by the experiences of second-generation black British youth, "whose identity was first and foremost British and secondly West Indian" (Rachel 2016, 231). Accordingly, these bands were stridently anti-racist, and many had been involved in RAR (Tranmer 2017, 5). The approach and objectives of AFA's cultural

praxis were, then, entirely compatible with most of the bands in this genre's own outlook. Because of this, AFA was able to forge beneficial relationships with many high-profile and successful mainstream 2-tone bands such as The Specials and The Selecter, who played benefit gigs for the antifascists, as well many less famous ska bands; the Leicester AFA branch even held an annual ska festival (see Fighting Talk 1997, 21). The antifascist ska band Knucklehead also "produced an AFA benefit tape, recorded live at Bath in August '94, with a percentage of the sales being donated to the militant group" (Fighting Talk 1995b, 4).

However, AFA had made it clear that their cultural praxis was largely aimed at gaining influence over areas of youth culture (see e.g. Anti-Fascist Action and Cable Street Beat 1988) which makes their choice to focus on punk and ska a curious one. By the early 1990s, both of these subcultures were of little interest to the vast majority of British youth. So, although AFA likely mobilised some resources from their efforts in these areas, it's unlikely they were politicising large numbers of youths. A possible answer as to why they expended so much energy on this area can be found in the literature on counter-movements. As Meyer and Staggenborg aver, when "a movement enters a particular venue, if there is the possibility of contest, an opposing movement is virtually forced to act in the same arena." (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996, 1649). Put another way, by achieving success in the skinhead subculture, B&H forced the antifascists into attempting to achieve the same. This may have resulted in AFA expending resources in this area at the expense of more popular, and thus strategically important, youth subcultural spaces.

3.3 Subcultural engagement: dance and rave culture

One of the more unusual aspects of AFA's cultural praxis was their attempt to carve out cultural space for the antifascist movement in the dance music scene. Their Freedom of Movement (FOM) campaign aimed to: "politicise the previously apathetic dance club scene, raising issues of racism and fascism. Set up by members of Manchester AFA and DJs from Manchester clubs, 'Freedom of Movement' aims to raise awareness of fascism and encourage people at least to identify with the anti-fascist cause and get active!" (Fighting Talk 1994a, 21). AFA recognised that the dance club scene was a space where "black and white, and gay and straight people mix and enjoy themselves together", and as such was fertile ground in which to sow the seeds of antifascism (Fighting Talk 1994a, 21). To achieve this, in 1993 the FOM campaign organised a series of benefit concerts throughout the country (Fighting Talk 1994a, 21; The List 1994, 68).

The literature on rave and electronic dance music culture provides mixed assessments of the extent to which this cultural space has been, or can be, politicised. Many have made the case that it is an apolitical subculture. Indeed, Gilbert and Pearson (1999, 182) have observed "that rave culture's ... experiences have thus been articulated with a libertarianism which is so anti-political as to be self-defeating". Elsewhere, Anderson and Kavanaugh (2007, 504) posited that, "the content of raves' political message was one of apathy. The culture was not geared toward social change". Reynolds (1997, 104) has even gone so far as to argue that "[r]ave culture has no goal beyond its own propagation".

Nevertheless, other academics have averred that rave and electronic dance music culture is a space in which both artists and subculturists engage with political and social issues in a range of novel ways. Ramzy Alwakeel (2010, 52) argues that dance and rave artists engage in a process of "aesthetic politics", whereby the very way in which the music is produced and performed is a response to structures and dynamics of political power. Examples of this include the Justified Ancients of Mu Mu's illegal sampling of materials in order to undermine copyright laws, the electronic dance music duo Autechre's challenging of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Bill through their Anti EP, and the illicit raves also held in defiance of this legislation.

From the perspective of the subculturists, Riley et al. argue that, although they may not engage in "formally organized civic and political activities", they do take part in "new, alternative forms of political and social

participation, which are unofficial and located at the individual or informal group level" (Riley, Griffin, and Morey 2010, 346). These novel forms of political participation, which they call "everyday politics", refer to the momentary construction of groups with shared values which provide "pockets of sovereignty over one's own existence" (Riley et al. 2010, 348). Similarly, Hunt et al. observed that for many people an important aspect of rave culture is that social barriers are reduced (often due to recreational drug use), which facilitates socialising between different ethnic groups (Hunt, Evans, Wu and Reyes 2005).

AFA's successes in the dance and rave milieu add weight to the idea that this is a subculture in which political causes can take root and find sustenance. Their success was no doubt in part due to the fact that the campaign organisers allowed the music, rather than the message, to take centre stage. As i-D magazine noted: "Justin Robertson is putting politics back on the agenda for the apathetic house generation ... Freedom of Movement is a mini club tour under the Anti Fascist Action banner ... Set up to politicize a scene where mixing is more often discussed than manifestos, it's a much-needed effort to give dance music a voice. But do clubbers want slogans and political doctrine when they're busy strutting their stuff? Probably not, and that's why it's not about ramming dogma down anybody's throat" (i-D Magazine 1993, n.p.).

Alwakeel (2010, 56) argues that "music's political currency lies not just in its lyrical content but in the modes of its use", and that rave can be considered "as a communication: not communication by an artist to a listener, but communication by a culture regarding itself. In being its own object, rave culture itself says 'rave sounds like this' or 'rave makes you feel like this' or, more generally, 'rave is'". Accordingly, when raves were arranged as performative events to challenge the Criminal Justice Bill in the early 1990s, they were defiantly stating "rave still is" (Alwakeel 2010, 56). By the same token, in putting on these events under the banner of AFA, the FOM campaign was making the statement that "rave is antifascist and antiracist."

That this message might have found a receptive audience is not as surprising as it may at first appear. I-D may have been correct in their assessment of the subculture being politically apathetic, and far more concerned with hedonism than activism. Nevertheless, the antiracist sentiment of the FOM campaign was entirely congruent with rave culture's "emphasis on altruism and hedonistic collectivity, as well as on racial acceptance" (John 2015, 21). As AFA reasoned, under "the divisive hate politics of fascism, such a vibrant and multiracial scene could not exist" (Fighting Talk 1994a, 21).

Moreover, that many prominent DJs were keen to support the FOM campaign suggests that, among the artists of the subculture at least, there was an appetite to politicise the rave and dance music scene on behalf of antifascism. Speaking about their involvement in FOM, DJ Charlie Hall from the electronic music duo The Drum Club stated that they were "both ex-punks who were around at the time of Rock Against Racism - I was arrested in '77 for demonstrating against the National Front in Lewisham ... I think the scene is starting to wake up ... A lot of other bands like Orbital and Underworld have very strong views against fascism ... We've just remixed Pressure of Speech who incorporate an anti-fascist message really effectively into their music - it's kind of a political collage of sound and words" (The List 1993, 54).

Between 1993 and 1996, the FOM campaign held a series of gigs in cities including from Edinburgh to London (The List 1993, 54; The List 1994, 68). Many of these concerts reportedly drew hundreds of people, raised substantial funds, and had AFA stalls providing merchandise and literature. In 1996 the FOM campaign also put out a double CD titled 'This Is Fascism', which was a benefit record with all profits going to AFA (Fighting Talk 1996a, 20).

The FOM campaign demonstrated that AFA was able and eager to operate in newer cultural spaces that were arguably much more relevant to both youth and working-class audiences in this period than punk or ska. They gained publicity, generated further funds through ticket and CD sales, and managed to spread their propaganda in new venues. However, assessing how much of an impact they had on the revellers who attended their club nights, and whether they created any more antifascists through their efforts, is difficult. Certainly,

the FOM campaign's relatively brief existence suggests that the antifascists did not gain a long-term foothold in the dance music scene.

3.4 Unity Carnivals

One of the most successful aspects of AFA's strategy of cultural praxis in terms of engaging with the public was their Unity Carnivals. These contentious performances were taken directly from the repertoire established by RAR: large-scale events, using well-known acts to attract sizeable crowds of attendees. The first was held on Sunday 8 September 1991 in East London, under an AFA and CSB banner.

Drawing around 10,000 attendees, this was the largest UK antifascist event for 13 years (Birchall 2010, 250). The carnival included an eclectic array of different bands, such as Soho, Gary Clail's On-U Sound System, The 25th of May, and Five Thirty (Red Action Bulletin 1992, 1). Continuing their efforts to raise antifascist consciousness, AFA also arranged for around "40 trade union and political groups" to be present, who promoted "alternatives to the reactionary arguments of the fascists" (Red Action Bulletin 1992, 1). In a press release about the event released shortly afterwards, AFA stated that as "a result of the Carnival a number of people joined Anti-Fascist Action, whilst others promised to gain support for AFA's future activities within their own organisations" (Anti-Fascist Action 1991b, 1). This suggests that AFA's cultural praxis may indeed have achieved some successes in mobilising supporters for the antifascist cause.

A second Unity Carnival was held at the same location the following year. This event received more promotion, with adverts and calls for support appearing in multiple issues of *Searchlight* (see, for example, Searchlight 1992a, 24 and Searchlight 1992b, 23). Compered by Attila the Stockbroker, this Carnival's line-up included Flowered Up, Ruthless Rap Assassins, 25th of May, and the Blaggers ITA (Anti-Fascist Action and Cable Street Beat 1992, 1). Around 10,000 attendees once more attended (Fighting Talk 1998, 15).

A third and final Unity Carnival was held in Newcastle in 1993, again attracting around 10,000 people (Newcastle Evening Chronicle 1993b, 24). The popular dance band The Shamen, whose controversial song Ebeneezer Goode had reached number 1 in the UK singles chart in 1992, were the headline act (Newcastle Evening Chronicle 1993b, 24). Other bands included Fun'da'mental, 25th May, Credit to the Nation and AOS3. *Searchlight* once more promoted the event, although in this instance the event received coverage from more mainstream media sources too. At least one national paper — The Daily Mirror — publicised the event, while the local press gave it significant positive coverage (Daily Mirror 1993, 23; Newcastle Journal 1993, 58 f.). The Newcastle Evening Chronicle even published an interview with TWAFA's Publicity Officer (Newcastle Evening Chronicle 1993a, 14).

There seems to have been a concerted effort by AFA to use this third Unity Carnival to target the wider community, rather than just attracting "militant sympathisers" (Birchall 2010, 293). This involved engaging with the local media to publicise both the carnival and other antifascist initiatives, as well as "youth workers mentioning the carnival and gauging what the young people expect from it and questioning why they think we are holding this carnival" (Newcastle Evening Chronicle 1993a, 14). The TWAFA Press Officer even stated that in the press that the "Carnival itself will be ... a platform to get anti-racism and anti-fascism discussed throughout the community in the run up to the event" (Newcastle Evening Chronicle 1993a, 14).

The extent to which the antifascists actually succeeded in encouraging the community to engage with antifascism is hard to assess. Several members of the local community had their impressions of the event recorded in the local press: one man who attended the carnival with his young family stated that it was "a brilliant idea, bringing people together like this" (Newcastle Evening Chronicle 1993c, 3); two thirteen year old girls said that they "came to see The Shamen and it's great" (Newcastle Evening Chronicle 1993c, 3); and a nineteen-year-old The Shamen fan stated "I don't care about the weather ... we're just here for a good time"

(Newcastle Evening Chronicle 1993c, 3). Although this suggests the event was well received, nowhere are there indications it encouraged people to engage with antifascism. While using famous pop stars may be a reliable way to draw a crowd, and there was clearly some successes in encouraging those with existing antifascist sympathies to become more active, it is less clear whether this was an effective way to encourage non-believers to think deeply about political causes.

4. Denying the Far Right Cultural Space

4.1 Cable Street Beat And Fighting Talk

Similar to RAR before it, CSB had its own publication, *Cable Street Beat Review*. Here the direct lineage from RAR to CSB could be quite clearly seen, as on its cover the antifascists wrote the slogan "Love Music - Hate Racism", that had first been used by RAR in 1977 (Rachel 2016, 46). CSB updated this with their own slogan: "Move Your Feet To The Cable Street Beat" (Cable Street Beat 1988, 2). This magazine included features, news, and interviews with bands and artists.

Importantly, *Cable Street Beat Review* also became an effective tool in the antifascists' attempts to change their enemies' structure of political opportunities. They used the publication to prevent the far right from performing and selling their music by applying pressure on groups and labels to distance themselves from these artists. Groups who played gigs with far-right bands were named and shamed, as were the record labels that put out their music and the shops that sold it (see e.g. Cable Street Beat Review 1989c, 20). Antifascists also gathered intelligence on the far-right music scene and shared this with the readers of *Cable Street Beat Review*. As B&H groups struggled to organise gigs, they tried using pseudonyms to hide their activities. Antifascists worked hard to discover these *noms de guerre*: "Skrewdriver have performed as 'Strikeforce' and Brutal Attack as 'Valhalla'. So we urge antifascists to be on the alert for nazi bands using different names and would welcome any information about these sort of bands in your area" (Cable Street Beat Review 1990b, 3)

For their part, the publication's readers were keen to respond in kind, sending in letters about local far-right bands and shops selling far-right materials in their areas (Cable Street Beat Review 1990a, 23). After CSB was wound-down, AFA continued this work in their *Fighting Talk* publication. A regular column titled "A View From Valhalla" provided readers with information and intelligence on the activities of the B&H network (as well as other far-right musical endeavours), thereby facilitating the efforts of antifascists to prevent the far-right from developing cultural space in their local areas (see e.g. Fighting Talk 1995, 14).

4.2 Disrupting far-right cultural networks and channels of distribution

One of the ways in which AFA's cultural praxis innovated on past attempts to use culture for political ends was in altering their opponents' political opportunity structure to deny them the chance to construct their own cultural spaces. By the time of AFA's founding in 1988, antifascists were beginning to notice the far right's efforts to develop music scenes and networks both in the UK and throughout Europe. *Searchlight* published an article in February 1988 about the "the various bands whose role is to act as recruiting sergeants for the far right", observing that most "years at least three major gigs are held" by the far right, "attracting very large numbers of young skinheads and several bands" (Searchlight 1988a, 3). Red Action warned that this was an "area of working class culture where neo-fascists" were gaining "a growing hold" (Red Action Bulletin 1988, 3). Unlike their predecessors in RAR, the militant antifascists were not satisfied with simply utilising culture to advance their arguments. They were also determined to deny their enemies the same opportunity.

Accordingly, AFA attempted to disrupt their enemies' music networks and channels of dissemination. One of the most successful operations in this area was their efforts to close down two shops in Central London that had been selling materials produced by neo-Nazi bands. These stores, the Merc and Cutdown, were specifically selling B&H merchandise. RA, AFA, and CSB argued that the presence of these stores had resulted in London becoming "the 'cultural centre' for Fascism in Europe, Australia and even America" (Red Action Bulletin 1989a, 1 f.). On 10 January 1989, AFA held a press conference "to announce the launch of a campaign against the existence of a number of shops in and around Carnaby Street which quite openly sold Nazi propaganda, including records, T-shirts, and literature" (Red Action Bulletin 1989a, 1 f.). Soon after, Jeremy Corbyn, "Labour MP for Islington North, tabled an Early Day Motion to draw attention to the issue in the House of Commons" (Searchlight 1988b, 3)

The campaign began with a mass picket outside the stores on 21 January 1989. Around 200 activists attended the demonstration. Subsequent pickets were frequently organised in the area by AFA and members of the Polytechnic of Central London Student Union (Cable Street Beat Review 1990c, 4). The campaign lasted around five months and succeeded in pressuring the stores into removing far-right materials (Searchlight 1989, 4). One of the stores, Cutdown, was even forced to move premises (Birchall 2010). Their campaign effectively eliminated one of the far right's major channels of distribution and sources of income. While this had largely been achieved through non-violent means, before it relocated Cutdown was broken into by antifascists who smashed a large volume of the shop's stock with sledgehammers (Red Action Bulletin 1989a, 1 f.).

In 1993 AFA embarked on a similar campaign against another London shop called Badge Sales. AFA stated that B&H had used the shop "since 1988 as a warehouse and distribution centre for their merchandise". The shop was allegedly selling "nazi T-shirts", as well as a "wide range of swastikas, celtic crosses, white power badges, and SS flashes". Additionally, AFA asserted that the owner was on "first name terms" with Ian Stuart Donaldson (Anti-Fascist Action 1994, 1), and employed "known sympathisers of the Blood & Honour movement" (Anti-Fascist Action 1993, 1). AFA, then, arranged a campaign to "stop the flow of blood money into the coffers of the fascist movement" (Anti-Fascist Action 1994, 1). As well as picketing the store, AFA encouraged antifascists to "write to Westminster Council demanding an end to the sale of fascist propaganda" and to inform them about "any other outlets for Blood and Honour in your area" (Anti-Fascist Action 1994, 1). Red Action later reported that because of AFA's efforts Badge Sales was "forced to cease trading", again robbing B&H of a key channel of distribution (Red Action Bulletin 1999, 9 f.).

4.3 Preventing far-right musical events

The militant antifascists also disrupted the far right's music events. In so doing, the activists drew much more from the established militant antifascist repertoire of direct action and violent confrontation, although specifically targeted at far-right concerts and their arrangements. These activities resulted in many large-scale conflicts between antifascists and far-right activists and concertgoers. The first of these occurred on the same day that militant antifascists broke into Cutdown. B&H had arranged a high-profile concert in London, with around 1,200 tickets being sold throughout the UK and Europe. The planned venue was Camden Town Hall, although pressure from AFA resulted in the concert venue having to be changed (Copsey 2017, 161). B&H kept the new venue's location secret, instructing ticket holders to first go to a redirection point at Hyde Park from where they would be given the new venue's location. However, AFA activists then occupied this area, attacking the far-right concertgoers as they arrived and disrupting B&H's redirection system. The antifascists reportedly stopped around 500 people from getting to the concert (Red Action Bulletin 1989b, 1 f.).

The next large-scale incident, dubbed the "Battle of Waterloo", occurred on 12 September 1992. B&H publicly announced their plans to put on a concert in London, with Waterloo Station being chosen as the

redirection point for attendees. On the day, around 1,000 antifascists heeded AFA's call and mobilised against the far right at Waterloo. The clash between the opposing sides was of such a scale that five tube stations and two British Rail stations were closed down. Traffic over Waterloo Bridge was also brought to a standstill (Carter 2020, 104).

A third incident occurred two years later, on 15 January 1994, when B&H attempted to hold another concert in London (Carter 2020, 104). This event was announced as a memorial concert for Ian Stuart Donaldson who had died in a car crash in 1993. AFA attacked the far-right organisers and their event twice throughout the day, significantly disrupting the day's planned proceedings. Following these events, B&H, and the far right more generally, found it all but impossible to organise further gigs in the capital (Birchall 2010).

4.4 Intra-movement Cultural Praxis

Throughout this period, the more moderate elements of the UK antifascist movement implemented their own cultural praxis. *Searchlight* magazine ran a number of operations to arrest the growth of far-right cultural spaces. One of these was directed against a mail-order record business called Groove Records, which operated a stall on weekends at London's Electric Ballroom. An undercover antifascist working with *Searchlight* visited Groove Record's stall and gathered evidence of him selling extreme-right music (Searchlight 1996, 1). This led to the company receiving a ban from running their stall in the Electric Ballroom (Camden & St Pancras Chronicle 1996, 3). *Searchlight* wanted the man to be prosecuted under section 23 of the Public Order Act (Searchlight 1996, 1). The same year, *Searchlight* also intervened in the production of CDs for the extreme-right group Combat 18 (who at this time controlled B&H). On learning that a company, Nimbus, was manufacturing B&H albums they contacted solicitors to look into the company's liability for producing illegal material (Searchlight 1996, 1) and contacted Nimbus directly.

Moderate antifascists also attempted to prevent far-right music concerts from going ahead. *Searchlight* ran a joint operation with several police forces to prevent a RAC mini-festival proceeding in August 1997 (Searchlight 1997). The ANL also attempted to have a number of B&H gigs cancelled. In one instance, they attempted to stop one that was planned to take place in the constituency of Prime Minister John Major by appealing to him to intervene directly (Anti-Nazi League 1992, 1).

Given the similarities in objectives, why could the different antifascist groups not work together on these campaigns? For their part, AFA generally refused to cooperate with other antifascists if doing so involved working with agents of the state. They argued that if "you seriously oppose the fascists in a way which is effective, you are operating against the state. This is a fact of life" (Fighting Talk 1994b, 6). These divisions between the "legal" and "radical" (see Copsey 201, 7) antifascists sometimes caused problems for the movement. For example, Red Action reported that Groove Records "was already under AFA surveillance" and that by having it closed down, *Searchlight* "den[ied] militant antifascism a source of intelligence on the far right" (Red Action Bulletin 1999, 9 f.).

AFA's use of political violence was similarly off-putting to the more moderate and law-abiding antifascists. Indeed, Red Action was formed by people who had been expelled from the SWP in large part due to their violent strategies against the far right in the 1970s (Carter 2020). So although they did achieve significant victories with it, this aspect of their cultural praxis may have both caused further divisions within the antifascist movement and discouraged some people from getting involved in AFA.

5. Conclusion

Much has been written about the militant antifascist movement's use of violence. Their extra-legal activities are often the main, or sole, focus of the historical examinations of these groups. But as this article has shown, physical-force confrontations were only ever one option in a much broader repertoire of contentious strategies. AFA expended considerable time and energy between 1988 and 2000 in operating on a cultural battlefield. This resulted in numerous concerts being held all over the country, several records being released across a range of genres, three large-scale carnivals with thousands of attendees, and successful campaigns to prevent far-right and racist material being distributed or performed. Although this was not a move towards principled non-violence on the part of Anti-Fascist Action, who remained committed to their strategy of physical-force opposition to the far right, it does demonstrate that they had a more sophisticated contentious repertoire than is usually acknowledged.

There were two ways in which AFA managed to leverage their cultural activities to their strategic advantage. The first way was by creating cultural space for their movement through which the broader public could be engaged with. This allowed the organisation to mobilise resources, such as activists and money, as well as providing engaging channels through which to spread its ideology. It also offered the opportunity to broker transnational alliances and shift the scale of contention to the international level.

The second way was in altering their opponents' political opportunity structure to deny them the chance to construct their own public cultural spaces and networks of dissemination. To that end, they ran intelligence-gathering operations using their networks of branches and organs such as Cable Street Beat Review and Fighting Talk. They also had gigs cancelled and pressured stores to stop selling materials produced by far-right groups. At times, AFA's pursuit of this aim dovetailed with the more violent elements of their strategies, when they physically attacked the organisers and attendees of fascist music events. Nevertheless, they also utilised numerous non-violent methods to achieve this goal, such as raising public awareness of far-right events and mobilising local communities against them.

Of course, there were some weaknesses with the strategy. In part because of the nature of being a countermovement, when B&H seemed to make some headway in the skinhead subculture AFA felt all but compelled to compete with them there. While this no doubt garnered some money, publicity, and support for their cause, it was something of a diversion from their stated objective of influencing youth culture. It is also unclear the extent to which their events, carnivals, and club nights made an impact on those people present who were not already committed antifascists. It seems that some of those who attended the third unity carnival did not begin to engage with antifascism the way AFA might have hoped. Moreover, the more violent elements of their cultural praxis suffered the same problems that militant antifascism historically has: a degree of public opprobrium and further division of the antifascist movement.

Nevertheless, this was a strategy that produced clear results for AFA. While the UK far right was either moving away from activities on "the streets" and becoming more electable, such as the BNP, or fading from view due to volatility and incarceration, such as Combat 18, the far-right "white power" music scene had proliferated globally (Shaffer 2017). Yet AFA's actions were a considerable impediment to this scene, at least domestically. B&H found it much harder to maintain active networks of performance and distribution in the UK due to the militant antifascists' efforts. They had to operate in a clandestine manner, arranging gigs in secret and selling their merchandise through private channels: "a state of affairs still on-going today" (Worley and Copsey 2016, 40). This had a deleterious effect on their ability to raise funds and to spread their ideology.

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