Youth with no future? Restless youth, radical politics and pop culture in the 1980s in Europe

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Growing up in Europe, 1945 to now

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YOUTH WITH NO FUTURE?

Restless youth, radical politics and pop culture in the 1980s in Europe

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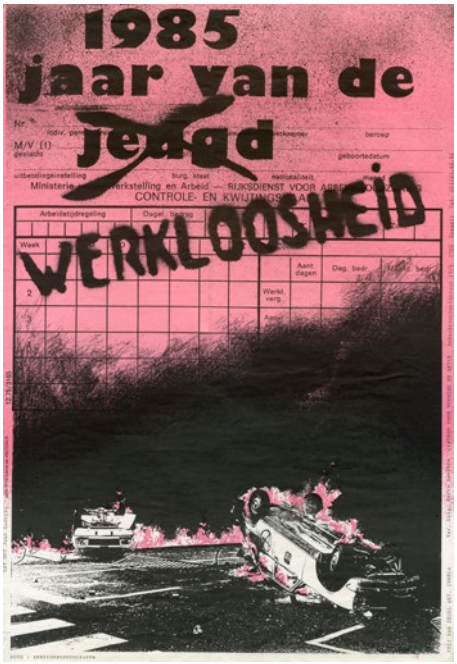
As the 1970s drew to a close, European youth seemed to enter a bleak decade. According to some, European youth faced an existential crisis, as they were confronted with economic insecurity, political opposition and even threats to their very survival; youths especially feared a nuclear war during the 1980s. Even so, the young did not passively undergo their fate. Rather, the sense of crisis and the seemingly approaching end times created new possibilities and opportunities as nothing, least of all the future of society, was at stake any more. The call 'no future' thus became a rallying cry to experiment in politics and culture, leading to a revitalisation of political participation and a renewal of pop culture. In both fields, young people played a central role.

This essay reconstructs how European youths in the 1980s engaged in politics and cultural production, and explores what motivated these young people, how they expressed their societal fears, frustrations and desires and how this changed over time. This contribution focuses especially on the interactions between politics and culture, and furthermore investigates how cultural and political movements interacted across borders. In a time before the internet and mobile phones, interactions between young people in different countries were often haphazard and discontinuous, but nevertheless had lasting influence. Since politics and culture are very broad themes, this essay focuses on two of the most visible and prominent aspects of youth politics and culture: protest politics and pop culture.

Youth protest and pop culture in Europe were closely connected during the 1980s, as punk songs provided the soundtrack for large demonstrations, while pop artists regularly took inspiration from protests and the concerns of young people. The overlap, however, was not complete and large sections of mainstream pop culture did not concern themselves with politics at all. In a similar way, the various protests during the decade picked up on similar themes and interacted with each other, but also remained strongly embedded in local and national contexts. What connected young people active in politics and pop culture in the 1980s was a shared desire to autonomy; to be among likeminded youths and to take control over their own lives. From punk's Do It Yourself (DIY) attitude, to the squatter activists' desire to 'take back the city', to Cindy Lauper's exclamation 'when the working day is done/girls just wanna have fun', the desire for autonomy rang clear through the various expressions of youth politics and pop culture.



1.
1985, year of ~~youth~~ unemployment
Poster, Belgium, 1985
AMSAB, Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis, Ghent, Belgium

No future? No future!

At the turn of the decade, the economy and politics underwent fundamental changes that strongly influenced protest politics and pop culture. As the economic crisis deepened, unemployment soared on the Western side of the Berlin Wall, and a painful and protracted process of deindustrialisation started. On the other side of the Wall, the economic downturn caused a decline in the quantity and quality of consumer goods. Young people especially were affected by the economic slump as youth unemployment skyrocketed and purchasing power declined. The fact that nobody seemed to know what would replace the industrial economy led to deep-felt feelings of social insecurity.

Economic decline was supplemented by a political turn, away from Keynesianism and towards neoliberal politics of austerity. Political leaders in Western and Eastern Europe were either unwilling or unable to keep up the politics of deficit spending and instead had to cut social welfare. The political shift again hit young people hard since education, as well as cultural and recreational programmes, relied heavily on governmental support. Simultaneously, many politicians embraced conservative values and law-and-order attitudes that especially targeted deviating behaviour of the youth.

Finally, the reheating of the Cold War affected young people on both sides of the Berlin Wall. The Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 ended the era of détente, and East-West tensions grew further when NATO decided in 1981 to station mid-range nuclear missiles in Western Europe in response to the Soviet Union's development of SS-20 nuclear missiles. NATO's decision led to massive protests in Western Europe and renewed fears for nuclear war. According to polls, the percentage of Europeans believing that nuclear war was 'probable in the next 10 years' rose from just over 10 % in 1977 to more than 30 % in 1980.

None of the above-mentioned developments targeted young people specifically, but with less life experience to fall back on and being more economically dependent, young people did feel societal pressures more strongly. Furthermore, many of them felt that their voices went unheard as they had less means to intervene and influence economic or political processes. This sense of powerlessness was expressed in various ways.

In pop culture, the threat of nuclear war and the felt inability to intervene stimulated a sense of resignation and withdrawal, which was expressed by various European pop artists, from West Germany's Nena ('99 Luftballons', 1983) to UK's The Smiths ('Stretch out and Wait', 1986; and 'Panic', 1988), and the Netherlands' Doe Maar ('De Bom', 1983). All of them expressed similar emotions; The Smiths sang: 'Will the world end in the night time?/Or will the world end in the day time?/Oh, I don't know/All I do know is we're here and it's now'. In a similar way, Doe Maar sang about the nuclear bomb: 'Just let it drop/it will happen anyway/it's no use running/I do not know you/I want to know who you are'.

The punk scene that rose to prominence across Western Europe in the 1980s took a more aggressive stance, though the feelings they expressed were of a similar nature. The famous punk band the Sex Pistols had already given voice to these feelings in the late 1970s with iconic song lines 'No future', and 'We're pretty/pretty vacant/and we don't care'. Their music however started to resonate more strongly at the turn of the decade, when a wave of punk music and punk youths took over Western Europe by surprise. On the one hand, punk confronted society and authorities with their aggressive and provocative style. At the same, they too articulated longing for withdrawal. If society did not care for the youth, why would the youth care for society? And if there was no future, why not turn your back on society and simply have fun with likeminded youths? In simple lyrics, the Sex Pistols expressed this complex mixture of feelings of resignation, refusal and *joie de vivre* and trail-blazed the genre into the 1980s.

Although only a small percentage of European youth became 'punks', the genre had a lasting impact on mainstream pop culture and the protest politics of the 1980s. First of all, because it articulated the feeling that if society was doomed, at least one could have fun in the here and now, and secondly because it encouraged a DIY attitude that empowered young people to experiment with new forms in both politics and culture. Punk stripped music to its core. Throughout the 1970s, rock music had become ever more symphonic, bombastic and psychedelic. Punk forced a hard break, creating a 'year zero' for rock music, bringing it back to only three chords and the basic rock 'n' roll rhythm. Furthermore, punk was not be listened to, but to be danced at. It was direct and loud and could be played by everyone. In the Sex Pistols' wake, thousands of young people taught themselves to play musical instruments, formed bands and started to write their own songs.

For many, punk became a simple but powerful genre, but for others it formed only the beginning of a musical odyssey. Soon after its conception, punk fanned out into a plethora of post-punk and new wave genres. Hardcore punk built on the loudness of punk music, while post-punk incorporated synthesizers and electronic drum kits in its songs. As punk developed into a staple of pop music, it also heralded new genres of electronic music.

2.
Punk pants
Soviet Union (Estonia), 1980s
Eesti Rahva Muuseum, Tartu, Estonia

These developments were not restricted to Western Europe. On the Eastern side of the Iron Curtain, too, a lively punk scene emerged that challenged the authorities with its deviating style and celebrated musical and social experimentation in the here and now. Of course, it took more effort to be a punk in the communist countries, as authorities were more suspicious and repressive towards punk youths. Even so, punk youths managed to carve out small niches in which they could meet, socialise and perform, while at the same time they could take advantage of the ignorance of the communist authorities towards the youth's subcultural codes. However, it wasn't only the attitudes of the authorities that posed challenges to punk youths. It was simply harder to come by punk records, clothes and apparel. While early punks in Western Europe had devised their own DIY style of cut-and-paste images, ripped jeans, leggings and leather jackets, the clothing industry had soon stepped in to reproduce and market the style. In the communist countries, young people inspired by punk had to generate their own clothing style and imagery, often with only few visual examples from Western Europe. Styles and slogans that were adopted from Western Europe often gained a different connotation in Eastern Europe, such as these lyrics from an anonymous punk from Poland regarding the slogan 'no future': 'In Britain, they sing "no future" … But I'd like to be on welfare payments there! If you want to know what "no future" means, come to Poland!'

Finally, punk encouraged directness and celebrated action above reflection, an attitude that influenced both music and protest politics. In protest politics, this development had already set in during the late 1970s, in the anti-nuclear movement and in radical left groups. The rise of punk stimulated the youth movements' turn away from elaborate Marxist analyses of society and instead favoured direct action and obstruction. They also started to re-emphasize the fun in political action and rejected the more orthodox views of political action as exercises in self-sacrifice. In protest politics, too, the rise of the 'punk left' signalled a break with the protest movements of the 1970s. The feelings of end-times and powerlessness were thus redirected into an eagerness to do it yourself; to experiment, act and play with new forms of music and political action.

Generation conflict?

The beginning of the 1980s saw the whole of Europe swept up in a wave of protests in which young people played an important role. But although protests occurred and often escalated in the same time frame, they took up such different themes and mobilised such different groups that it is hard to speak of one youth revolt. The protests were fragmented and embedded in local and national contexts. As the decade progressed protest movements in different European countries became more synchronized.

In the United Kingdom and in France, the early 1980s witnessed protests and revolts of young people with a migrant background, who protested their subordinate position in society, police violence and discrimination. Around the same time, young people in the Netherlands, West Germany, Denmark and Switzerland occupied houses and buildings to protest housing shortage and technocratic urban renewal projects. On the other side of the Iron Curtain, Poland faced massive strikes against wage cuts and higher work quota on such a scale that they seriously destabilised the regime and even threatened the rule of the communist party.

Protests could thus be seen all over Europe, but there were rarely strong links between the protesters in different countries. Revolting and protesting youths in the UK and France did not foster close contacts. Squatters in the Netherlands, West Germany and Switzerland did attempt to forge connections, but in most cases these were haphazard and discontinuous and remained limited to short visits, exchange of newspapers and calls to join demonstrations and protests. A stable, well-organised international network was not pursued or realised. It was even more difficult to build or maintain contacts across the Iron Curtain. Squatter youths in West Berlin did respond to the installation of martial law in Poland in 1981 with a march under the banner 'Revolt in East and West — against the Warsaw Pact and the NATO-pest', but they had no organisational or personal contacts with striking Polish workers.

Just as punk played an important role in pop culture even though only a small portion of young people were 'punks', so did squatters play an important role in European protest politics even though they only mobilised a small portion politicised European youth. The majority of the politically active youth in Europe may have been organised in Christian democratic, social democratic or communist youth organisations, but these organisations did not set the agenda of 1980s protest politics. The squatters played an important role in protest politics because their actions resonated with larger groups, because they practised a complex mixture of opposition, withdrawal and eagerness to experiment, and because they innovated protest repertoires on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

The squatters of the 'punk left' forced a break with the social movements of the 1970s in a similar way that punk did with the rock music of the 1970s. In the views of the 1980s squatter activists, the activists of the 1970s had either been incorporated by the political establishment, resigned themselves to theoretical reflection or walked the dead-end path of urban guerrilla. The Hamburg punk band Slime summed up this view in their song 'linke Spießer' (1983): 'Always critical and political/Marx and Lenin on the bedside table/But you've got something against clashes/And you happily make room for the police … And when we become aggressive/You are all suddenly conservative.' Similarly to punks, the squatter activists favoured direct action over theoretical reflection. This attitude was translated into spectacular occupations of houses and buildings, squares and construction sites. Attempts by the authorities to evict squatters regularly gave way to violence and street fighting.

In Amsterdam, an attempt by the police to evict a squatted house on the Vondelstraat in February 1980 led to clashes between youths and the police, after which the latter withdrew and activists blockaded the street for a full weekend. The street had to be evicted with the use of armoured military caterpillars. A year later, squatters in the Dutch city of Nijmegen squatted 15 buildings and barricaded the street for a full week. In anticipation of the

military caterpillars, they even dug a tank ditch. At the same time, a wave of squatting went through West Berlin and Zurich and from there spread to the rest of West Germany, Switzerland and Denmark. In 1981, Amsterdam counted more than 206 squatted buildings, housing more than 1,300 people, while West Berlin at its height counted 284 squats. The squatters profiled themselves as outcasts, whose voices went unheard and who had to use violence as a last resort to claim their rightful place in society. Squatting was a means to acquire self-governed spaces and take back control over their lives. Direct action was the only way to make themselves heard, the squatters claimed. Some Amsterdam squatter graffiti stated: 'Stones are no arguments/stones are merely/hesitant attempts/to speak/in the only language/they understand. We have much more to say!'

Were these young people turning their back on society? Despite the spectacular rise of punk and the squatter movement, this was not the case. A poll among West German youths in 1980 revealed that only a small minority had lost its faith in society and its future. Most of them agreed with the basic tenets of social organisation and were willing to improve on it. Still, although only a small portion of European youths withdrew from society or became punks, they received a great deal of attention from journalists, social scientists and politicians, who felt that they articulated more generally shared feelings of frustration and desire among young people.

Authorities, often themselves witnesses of the 1960s youth protests, responded with a mixture of accommodation and repression. In France, the government responded to the youth riots of 1980 by investing in police, but also in local delinquency prevention, urban development and social housing. In West Berlin, the city government resisted any new squatter attempts by the end of 1981, but legalised 105 of the remaining 165 squatted buildings in the city. Especially in larger cities, social-democrat-ruled councils invested in youth clubs and social centres that offered young people recreation spaces for socialising and performing. As a result, a network of youth clubs, social centres and punk venues emerged that not only facilitated the blossoming of youth cultures, but also revitalised city centres and dilapidated neighbourhoods.

In Eastern Europe, authorities acted in a similar way, although overall the balance was more towards repression. Next to the official youth movement, the communist regimes allowed some space for independent or alternative youth scenes. In Poland, the Jarocin rock festival, formally organised by the communist youth organisation, evolved into a breeding ground for alternative music and even heralded an independent punk scene that subsequently further developed outside of the purview of the communist authorities. In

3.
Paintbombs used by squatters against the police
Amsterdam, the Netherlands, 1980s
Nationaal Veiligheidsinstituut (Nederlands Politiemuseum), Apeldoorn, the Netherlands

4.
Fights between the police and young demonstrators
Photograph, Gdańsk, Poland, 1989
Fundacja Ośrodka KARTA, Warsaw, Poland

Yugoslavia, too, authorities treated punk youths with a combination of ignorance, repression and facilitation. In Ljubljana, the years 1980-81 became known as 'punk spring', with punk youths gaining a mass presence in the city's centre. Punks even dubbed their main hangout, which was only tens of meters away from the Revolution Square, the Johnny Rotten Square, after the name of the Sex Pistols' lead singer. This all too visible presence of punk youths was countered by the regime with a repressive campaign and the arrest of various young punks, but the scene was not seriously affected.

Although the youth protests in Europe at the beginning of the 1980s were fragmented and mainly embedded in local and national contexts, they were linked in various ways. The protesting youths demanded a voice and articulated their frustration at feeling ignored by the government. The movements were to some degree inspired by punk as they took to direct action and proved willing to confront the authorities. The latter did not respond with indiscriminate repression but instead balanced repression and facilitation, which allowed young people on both sides of the Iron Curtain to carve out spaces for socialising, recreation and cultural production.

Synchronization of youth protests

Youth protests in different countries at the beginning of the 1980s were not strongly connected, but protest movements became ever more linked internationally as the decade progressed. Nevertheless, international coordination did not ensure political success and could even cause social movements to lose connection with their local grassroots. The balance between local mobilisation and international coordination was not always easy to find.

The first movement of the decade to coordinate extensively on an international scale was the peace movement that grew to prominence in Western Europe between 1981 and 1983 in response to NATO's decision to station mid-range nuclear missiles in Western Europe. As the decision had to be ratified by the concerned member countries, massive opposition movements emerged all over Western Europe. In the Netherlands, a demonstration in 1981 mobilised 400,000 people, while a second in 1983 mobilised 550,000. In West Germany, 350,000 people protested in Bonn in 1981 and 500,000 in 1982. In other West European countries, the peace movement gained mass backing as well.

Although the movements coordinated on an international level, their focus lay on influencing national policy. In doing so, they achieved mixed results. None of the NATO members declined to station mid-range missiles, but the Dutch government, pressured by protest movements, was granted a delay of two years in 1985. By 1987, however, the relations between the West and the communist world had improved to such an extent that the missiles were never stationed in the Netherlands. In the other countries, however, protest movements did not manage to realise such success. One response to failing international and national success was to focus more on local activism. This happened for example in the campaign for 'nuclear-free zones' in West Germany and Italy. On a local scale, be it a school, a neighbourhood, a town or even a city, activists appealed to authorities to declare the space free of nuclear power and weapons to thus thwart national decisions on a local scale. Although the practice was local, these campaigns were often nationally coordinated and inspired by international examples. As attempts to block national decisions, however, they were not successful.

The 'nuclear-free zones' were only one example of how the peace movement connected activism on a local, national and international scale. Peace movements soon fostered international relations and exchanged ideas, attitudes and protest forms. Forming extensive human chains to protest against nuclear weapons or blocking military transports were other protest forms that spread internationally.

The peace movement did not resonate as strongly in Eastern Europe, where the communist regime did not allow for oppositional demonstrations, but it was nevertheless picked up by anti-communist dissidents. Since the communist regimes declared themselves safeguarders of peace in Europe, the topic of peace allowed dissidents to mobilise on a small scale, claiming that they did nothing more than endorse the goals and ambitions of the regimes. This happened in East Germany but also in Poland, where the youth group Freedom and Peace became one of the most prominent opposition movements after the repression of Solidarity in 1981. The group started as a support group for young people refusing military service and fostered contacts with peace groups in other countries. Throughout the 1980s, they grew into a more general opposition movement and one of the trail-blazers of renewed opposition in Poland in the late 1980s. The group especially became famous for their spectacular 'scaffold-ins', during which activists would occupy scaffolds and hang out banners, thus reaching a large audience, especially because of their contacts with Western media.

Protest movements became even more connected in the mid-1980s, first of all in response to the Chernobyl accident, which reinvigorated the anti-nuclear movement in Western Europe and also gave dissident movements in Eastern Europe a boost. The second major theme of political protest from the mid-1980s onwards was anti-racism and opposition against the apartheid regime in South

Africa. This theme resonated all over Western Europe and mobilised both moderate and radical groups, who often interacted and exchanged ideas and tactics internationally. Radical activists in the Netherlands, West Germany and other countries campaigned against Shell's involvement in South Africa, and slashed the cables of petrol pumps, demanding Shell's withdrawal from South Africa. The activists often acted in small groups and international coordination was negligible, but the action form nevertheless spread over Western Europe. This, however, also created tensions. When a West Berlin activist group evaluated their campaign, they stated self-critically that during many actions 'we were with our thoughts closer to our example in the Netherlands than to the present conditions' in West Berlin.

As youths protested internationally, they reaffirmed their voice and tried to influence European politics. Their concern for autonomy was expressed through new ways of organising, as young people preferred informal and horizontal organisation and direct action. The international synchronization of protest was in part a response to international issues, such as the NATO double-track decision, but also to lack of success in national mobilisations. Throughout the 1980s, the balance between local action, national mobilisation and international coordination was continuously renegotiated, but there were no easy answers as to the perfect formula to connect the three levels.

Taming technology

Technological developments in the 1980s, especially the introduction of the personal computer, thrilled the imagination of young people in Europe and beyond. Although the capacity of early PCs was limited, as their processing power was small and they could not link up to a computer network (only in France did the precursor of the internet, Minitel, gain a mass audience during the 1980s), the possibilities seemed endless. Furthermore, governments and corporations invested in automatisation and 'computerisation' of work processes and their administration, whose restructure eliminated unskilled labour positions, often the entry jobs for young workers.

The emergence of the computer enlivened both fears and hopes for the future; fear of global subjugation by computer-controlled surveillance regimes, and hopes for individual empowerment through unlimited access to information and technological resources. Neither of the two prospects were very realistic in the early 1980s, given the limited capabilities of computers, but they nevertheless occupied young people's minds, especially since these hopes and fears directly linked to their concern for autonomy and control over their own lives. Orwell's 1984, released as a movie in that same year, envisioned a computerised surveillance society. On the other side of the spectrum stood the film *War Games* (1983), in which a young boy unwittingly hacks into a NATO computer network and almost starts a nuclear war. In the first movie, individuals were stripped of their initiative through computers; in the second movie the same computers enabled individuals to take control.

The major reflection on the changing role of technology took place in the form of pop cultural films. Because they were fictional, they could extrapolate technological and social developments and explore how they would affect society. In doing so, they constituted an important medium for young people to reflect on the place and future of technology in society. It is no coincidence, then that the 1980s became a new golden age for science fiction. Released in 1977, *Star Wars: A New Hope* revived the genre, after which a flood of movies and franchises followed, in which youths were assigned a central role in taking back control over society from authoritarian regimes and manipulative corporations. Although most of them were made in Hollywood, they became highly popular in Europe as well.

Science fiction movies thus created a new awareness of the dangers and possibilities of computers. In the real world, however, possibilities were more limited. For access to computers alone, young people were dependent on their parents and schools. In dealing with computers, the main opposition was not between surveillance and

5.
Coney walkman
Poland, 1980s
House of European History, Brussels, Belgium

hacking, but between consumption and production. Computers were capable of running rudimentary games, some of which became very popular, but they also allowed young people to write simple code and create programmes and even games themselves. A fully computerised society, however, was still far away. For the exchange of knowledge and (self-written) games, young people had to meet in person in schoolyards or hangouts. The 1980s remained foremost an analogue society.

The same was true for another section of youth culture that was affected by computerisation: music. Technological development made synthesizers, electrical drum kits and drum computers affordable to larger audiences, and in the wake of punk's development into new wave, underground pop groups started to experiment with them. Mainstream pop artists picked up on the development to create modern-sounding hit songs. Again, technology allowed young people to both produce and consume, and again this created tensions. The synthesizer and electrical drum kit gave 1980s pop music its particular, futuristic sound, but were also criticized for creating ever more similar 'computerised' hits. The suggestion that music had been automated was furthered by the 'disappearance' of support bands in the music videos of major pop artists such as Michael Jackson, Madonna and Kylie Minogue. Performing alone and singing over a tape track, it seemed as if the music had been automatically produced by a machine, while in reality the artists relied on session musicians for both recordings and live performances.

Similar tensions arose over the second development in pop music: the emergence of the DJ, 'turntablism' and fully electronic house music. Although these styles had their roots in the 1960s and 1970s, they reached mass audiences in the 1980s as the equipment became more affordable and more artists started to experiment. On the one hand, turntables allowed performers to experiment with cut-and-paste mixtures of songs, which gave way to new musical styles such as dub and house. On the other hand, the DJ replaced the band as the main performer in clubs and discotheques and seemed to relegate audiences to mere spectators. Even in 1988, The Smiths' front man Morrissey would still sing: 'Burn down the disco/Hang the blessed DJ/Because the music that they constantly play/It says nothing to me about my life'. Still, such pessimism could not stop the electronic music's breakthrough into the mainstream of pop music by the end of the 1980s.

The tension between passive consumption and active interaction with new technology was not resolved during the 1980s. Rather, the two possibilities made for innovation in both computer technology and pop music. In pop music, it was the combination of underground groups' eagerness to experiment and the aptitude of mainstream artists to incorporate innovations that gave 1980s pop music its own specific sound. All the while, young people were both the main producers and consumers of the genre.

From Cold War to new chaos

In 1989, both the decade and the communist regimes in Eastern Europe came to an end. For young people in Eastern Europe, this meant a sudden expansion of individual and social freedoms as well as the possibility of travel. As a result, youth subcultures grew and developed at a fast pace in Eastern Europe and not only picked up on the latest developments in punk and rock, but also on the rise of house music. After the so-called second summer of love, the sudden breakthrough of acid house music in the United Kingdom, the style spread over the continent into Eastern Europe. The music style seemed to articulate the sense of euphoria at new-found freedoms.

The end of the Cold War, however, soon gave way to new international tensions as civil war broke out in Yugoslavia, neoliberal policies became dominant and globalisation threatened democratic processes. Looking back, the 1980s were re-evaluated as an era of political stability and social security in both West and East, ignoring among others the social strife and threat of nuclear war that had frustrated and mobilised so many youths at the time.

The 1980s had started with widespread protests and a reheating of the Cold War. Young people especially felt affected by economic decline, cuts on social welfare and the threat of nuclear war. At the same time, young people could often fall back on social support from family or the state. It was this combination of social conflict, Cold War and relative social security that created the context in which youths could protest, experiment and play with protest forms and pop culture. In doing so, they revitalised political participation and innovated pop culture that left political and cultural youths in the 1990s with a rich legacy to build on.

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