We'll Help Ourselves: The English Working-Class Struggle to Remake Itself, ca. 1968-1985

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Abstract

“We’ll Help Ourselves: The English Working-Class Struggle to Remake Itself, 1968-1985” analyzes the changing nature of working-class activism in the United Kingdom in the second half of the twentieth century. I argue that the British working class responded to the changing nature of capitalism in new but recognizably working-class ways, remaking in the process the political stakes of the working class as well as scholars’ understanding of class in Britain. In four chapters, I examine responses to four crises in British society. Chapter one analyzes the squatter movement that formed in 1968 in response to a burgeoning housing crisis, and eventually grew into a movement that sought to enshrine a right of free housing for all. Chapter two examines the claimants’ union movement, a union of welfare state beneficiaries advocating for more generosity and easier access to the system. Both the squatters and the claimants—who were often the same people and mostly, but not exclusively white men—worked together for an eventual worker-controlled communist society. Women and racial minorities continued to face problems derived from their socially and economically subordinate positions in post-war Britain. Chapter three focuses on the Women’s Aid Federation, which provided refuges for abused women while at the same time advocating for a minimum income for women that was adequate to reduce their dependence on men. Chapter four analyzes the evolving and multifaceted movements of West Indian immigrants and native-born black Britons to fight racism and develop a political consciousness. Each of the groups I analyze struggled on two fronts: the first to secure access to particular resources, and the second to challenge the wider social constructions that prevented their access in the first place. My dissertation contributes to the historiography of class by arguing that the context of late-capitalism produced crises for the working class of similar magnitude to those that early industrialism had inflicted on earlier workers. Just as the earlier crises marked the “making” of the working class, these later crises necessitated the “remaking” of it.
Introduction

“It would probably take a Charles Dickens to do full justice to the labyrinth of indifference, red tape, callousness, and simple incompetence that exists between people in need and so many of the agencies that are meant to help them…”

---Erin Pizzey, Scream Quietly or the Neighbours Will Hear, 1974

The history of the working class in Great Britain is a well-covered topic. The range of analysis pertinent to this project begins with E.P. Thompson’s analysis of its “making” during the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries and ends with Selina Todd’s examination of its degradation and suppression nearly two hundred years later. The English working-class forms a core field of modern British historiography.\(^1\) Key to the self-fashioning of the working class is its relationship to industry and capitalism as well as Marxist concepts of class-consciousness and struggle over the means of production. This project contributes to the historiography of the working class in Britain by considering the changing nature of industry and capitalism during the period of deindustrialization, post-colonial immigration, and welfare state intervention in an analysis of working-class direct action activism. After nearly two decades of post-war welfare capitalism and full employment, by the late 1960s, the English working class, perhaps the most organized and militant in the world, experienced crises of such proportions that historians would do well to reimagine the concepts of class and consciousness.\(^2\) Classic assumptions about full-time work in heavy industries began to make less sense as textiles, metallurgy, auto-making, and

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finally mining disappeared as the traditional sources of well-paying full-employment for the working class. How does one analyze the working-class in the traditional sense when increasing numbers of its members found themselves unemployed, working precarious service jobs, or simply “existing” on state benefits, sometimes for years? The primary emphasis of this project is to analyze how the British working class responded to the significant changes in capitalism in new but recognizably working-class ways over the course of the 1970s.

This project owes a significant debt to E.P. Thomson’s landmark 1963 tome The Making of the English Working Class. In it, Thompson argues the working class was an historical phenomenon; it was a process of human relationships between unequal historical actors. In this sense, “class” was not a category of people or a structure that existed independently or ahistorically. Those who experienced it shaped it. The development of “class consciousness” was the culturally and historically contingent way those who made up the working class handled their position vis-à-vis those who had more power over them and more control over their economic wellbeing. This project analyzes the different expressions of class and class-consciousness in a post-industrial and welfare state context, which presented problems that the working class endeavored to overcome in new but still recognizably working-class ways. Class formation was born out of unequal societies, and the process of dealing with a subordinate position tended to have the effect of creating a unified concept or consciousness of the working class. Selina Todd argues further in The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working Class, 1910-2010 that it was the continued economic impoverishment of the working class, despite the welfare state, that was the major factor in making and maintaining the working class. Declining industries meant fewer opportunities for workers to develop a cohesive identity around shop-floor struggles. However, as chapters one and two will show, there was a sense of unity forged at the squat barricade and the welfare office.
occupation that could meaningfully create a sense of class-consciousness. The concepts of solidarity, mass mobilization, direct democracy, and a conflictual relationship with holders of power permeated the working class whether in full employment or living with less secure income. These ideals remained at the forefront of the movements analyzed in the chapters to follow.

The big, heavy-industry unions such as the Trades Union Congress, the Transport and General Workers’ Union, or the National Union of Mineworkers, once the embodiment of working-class identity and strength, play a very little role in this project because with deindustrialization and the rise of the welfare-state service economy, decreasing numbers of working-class people belonged to a union. Over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, more and more people found themselves unemployed and totally dependent on the welfare state, further reducing the significance of unions in their lives. The political parties of the left, the so-called workers’ parties from Labour to the Socialist Workers Party, are given minimal attention in this project. Over time, they seemed to have reified the working class to only mean the old industrial unions, and the parties took working-class support for granted without adequately addressing their real concerns (and often acting against them), which goes a long way toward explaining the rise and subsequent popularity of authoritarian populists (i.e., Thatcher) among some sections of the working class.

This project analyzes the changing nature of working-class activism in the United Kingdom in the second half of the twentieth century. I argue that the British working class responded to the changing nature of capitalism in new but recognizably working-class ways, and in the process remade the political stakes of the working class as well as scholars’ understanding of class in Britain. In four chapters, I examine responses to four crises in British society. Chapter one analyzes the squatter phenomenon that emerged in
1968 in response to a burgeoning housing crisis, and eventually grew into a movement that sought to enshrine a right to free housing for all. Chapter two examines the claimants’ union movement, a coalition of welfare state beneficiaries who advocated for more generosity and easier access to the system. Both the squatters and the claimants—who were often the same people and mostly, but not exclusively, white men—worked together for an eventual worker-controlled communist society. Women and racial minorities continued to face problems derived from their socially and economically subordinate positions in post-war Britain. Chapter three focuses on the Women’s Aid Movement, which provided refuges for abused women while at the same time advocating for a minimum income for women that was adequate to reduce their dependence on men. Chapter four analyzes the evolving and multifaceted movements of black Britons to fight racism and develop a coherent identity. Each of the groups I analyze struggled on two fronts: the first to secure access to particular resources, and the second to challenge the wider social constructions that prevented their access in the first place. My dissertation contributes to the historiography of class by arguing that the context of late-capitalism produced crises for the working class of similar magnitude to those that early industrialism had inflicted on earlier workers. Just as the earlier crises marked the “making” of the working class, these later crises necessitated the “remaking” of it.

Theoretical Framing

The theoretical basis of this project consists of new social movement theory, direct action, and anarchism. In particular, the works of French sociologist Alain Touraine, Italian sociologist Alberto Melucci, American anthropologist and anarchist David Graeber, and renowned British anarchist social historian Colin Ward guided this project. Taking a classic and neo-Marxist perspective, this project is built upon the idea of struggle over
material and cultural resources as significant drivers of historical change. The four groups analyzed (squatters, claimants, battered women, radical black Britons) all struggled for access to material resources they felt were denied them as well as challenged the cultural norms which justified their denial. Their primary method used toward these goals was direct action. Sometimes, these groups and organizations explicitly identified or aligned with anarchism: sometimes not. However, anarchism is the lens through which each of these movements will be analyzed because their dedication to direct action, non-hierarchical and de-centralized organizing, voluntary participation, and their promotion of an alternative structure to the state to meet their needs are, whether intentionally or not, how anarchism works.

When faced with homelessness, but surrounded by empty properties, the squatters simply moved in. When denied the welfare benefits to which they were entitled, the claimants’ unionists occupied social security offices or took their case to tribunals until they got satisfaction. The women of Women’s Aid argued battered women needed a place to escape their abuse before they could consider steps such as divorce or protective orders, so they opened up refuges and welcomed all who needed their support. Finally, while continually protesting against official and popular racism in the streets and pressuring statutory bodies to pass inclusive legislation, the radical black British movement also physically defended themselves against racist attacks and defended themselves in court against spurious charges brought by an institutionally racist police force. Each of these groups took it upon themselves to find solutions and create alternatives to an intolerable status quo. All of the groups analyzed envisioned a future in which needs were met and coercion was eliminated. Yet, like most anarchists, they also understood the necessity of
working within the current structures while aiming for a different future.\(^3\) It was the welfare state and Britain’s capitalist economy that made housing, social security, education, etc. available for these activists in the first place. However, their critique of the system created by the capitalist state was that the nature of capitalism made it unstable and the state provided material welfare at the expense of social justice. There was, therefore, no contradiction in the claimants’ union demand for full access to a generous welfare state while at the same time advocating for the overthrowing of that state because, as idealists but also realists, they understood the future society had to be built upon the wreckage of the present one. In the same way, although the Women’s Aid Federation would accept money from the government, they would not allow the government to decide how they ran their organization, even at the expense of governmental funding.

To return to social movement theory, Alain Touraine laid the basis in 1985. According to him, there is almost general agreement that social movements should be defined as a special type of social conflict. A social movement struggles against another actor, usually one in a position of power, over a specified resource. Social movements can be based upon cultural aspects, religious beliefs, or leisure activities, but for this project, the social movements analyzed tend to form around struggles for resources. There is generally a clear “field” in which they struggle (i.e., housing, welfare, gender equality, race relations).\(^4\) The social conflict maybe defensive or offensive; e.g., defending a minority ideology against the majority or demanding/taking more access to resources. These need not be mutually exclusive, as the cases of my subjects shall demonstrate. Touraine

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developed a five-point typology of social movements, and this project especially utilizes point five, “Social Control of the Main Cultural Patterns.” The unifying challenge of each group analyzed was their attempt to change their treatment by society. In this typology, there are clearly defined opponents and stakes. The squatters fought the landlords over housing. The claimants fought the Department Health and Social Security (DHSS) over benefits. Battered women had their abusers and indifferent police as their main adversaries. While black Britons faced an array of hostile actors. These new social movements, as I am defining them, differed from earlier movements because they were less concerned with gaining sociopolitical power or forming political parties, but instead demanded better access to sociocultural power and the right to self-actualization. This was especially true for the battered women and black Britons who primarily demanded it no longer be acceptable to abuse them.

Alberto Melucci follows up on this typology to discuss the symbolic change in new social movements. He states, “Collective action has always been treated either as an effect of structural crises and contradictions or as an expression of shared beliefs and orientations.” He then explains that the movements of the 1970s allowed sociologists to move beyond this model to focus more closely on the interests and beliefs of those involved. Less important to him were the crises that spurred social movements, than the organizational forms and methods of action they utilized. Of significant import to this study, Melucci argues, “organization form of contemporary movements is not just ‘instrumental’ for their goals. It is a goal in itself.” How this relates to anarchism will be

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5 Touraine, 779.
7 Melucci, 801.
further elaborated below. New social movements fought for symbolic and cultural stakes, not merely for material goals or increased participation in the system, though they struggled for these as well. They tried to change people’s lives and believed there could be change today while fighting for the future. For example, it would be rather useless for a social movement to leave people on the streets while asking the government for more social housing, so the squatters moved in those homeless people while at the same time pressuring private and public developers to increase the housing stock. There were similar strategies to be found among the other three groups.

A cursory examination of militant labor organizations, far-leftists, and civil rights movements will reveal an emphasis on direct action. Among anarcho-syndicalists and libertarian communists, the slogan “direct action gets the goods” is almost cliché.\(^8\) However, more so than a history of class, this project is a history of direct action that was especially successful, if only for a short while. Therefore, I want to ruminate on the subject. Anarcho-syndicalists define direct action as “The rejection of participation in parliamentary or statist politics and the adoption of tactics and strategies which place responsibility for action firmly in the hands of the workers themselves.”\(^9\) This is fine for a quick definition, but for a deeper understanding, anthropologist David Graeber provides a book-length treatment of the subject with real world examples in his *Direct Action: An Ethnography.* He begins his discussion with a couple of quotations:

> Direct action implies one's acting for one's self, in a fashion in which one may weigh directly the problem with which you are confronted, and without needing the mediation of politicians or bureaucrats. If you see some bulldozers

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about to wreck your house, you engage in direct action to directly intervene to try to stop them. Direct action places moral conscience up against the official law . . . It is the expression of the individual's readiness to fight, to take control of his life, and to try, directly, to act on the world that surrounds us, to take responsibility for one's actions (Sans Titres Bulletin, “What is Direct Action?”). 

And:

Examples of Direct Action include blockades, pickets, sabotage, squatting, tree spiking, lockouts, occupations, rolling strikes, slowdowns, [and] the revolutionary general strike. In the community, it involves, amongst other things, establishing our own organizations such as food co-ops, and community access radio and TV. Direct Action is not only a method of protest but also a way of "building the future now." [...] Direct Action shows that people can control their own lives—in effect, that an Anarchist society is possible (Rob Sparrow, "Anarchist Politics and Direct Action.").

I include both of these quotes to give a clear sense of the scope of direct action tactics to which most activists subscribe while also establishing the anarchist tone of direct action generally, but in grassroots activism in particular.

The theoretical guidance that colors my analysis in the chapters that follow stems from Graeber's next assessment. Anarchists do not wish to seize more state power for themselves, but instead endeavor to destroy that power consistent with their ends, to “build a new society in the shell of the old.” While each of the groups inhabited and had to deal with the existing structure of the British capitalist state, insofar as they could, they sought to create a life already free of those restraints: refusing state interference, priorities, laws, or control as much as possible. Anarchist direct action in the real world means acting as much as possible as if the state did not exist. In the cases to be examined, we shall see attempts, successful or otherwise, of grassroots groups to change their existing conditions through collective action and as little regard for the existing authorities as possible. The

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12 Graeber, 203.
clearest connection between explicit anarchism and the groups under analysis in this project was their rejection of a vanguard ideology (i.e., an ideologically disciplined elite will lead the masses to revolution). They instead tried to establish examples of the future model they wished to create that others could imitate. Eventually, this ends-as-means organization would make the state and the existing status quo simply irrelevant; so goes anarchist thinking.\footnote{Graeber, 210-211.} As will be shown, the squats, occupations, barricades, refuges, and supplementary schools formed a “micro-utopia” (Graeber’s term), a currently existing model of the future one hoped to achieve.

Finally, this project is built upon an explicitly anarchist reading of history. This is not an attempt to label as anarchists those who would not accept the title (although many of the squatters and claimants would), but instead to identify anarchism or anarchist aspects in historical events and activities. Anarchism in this sense is not a theoretical discourse about economics or revolutionary strategy; it is an ethical and moral discourse about revolutionary practice. As Graeber notes, “the basic principles of anarchism—self-organization, voluntary association, mutual aid, the opposition to all forms of coercive authority [all features of the four groups analyzed]—are essentially moral and organizational.”\footnote{Graeber, 212.} Moreover, as the great Russian anarchist thinker Peter Kropotkin analyzed mutual aid in the animal kingdom and local self-sufficiency and equitable distribution of labor and goods in the medieval city to demonstrate the possibility of non-statist cooperation, this project attempts to show the practice of anarchism even among those who might not otherwise be considered as such.\footnote{See Peter Kropotkin, \textit{The Conquest of Bread} (New York: Vanguard Press, 1926, Original: Paris, 1892); Kropotkin, \textit{Fields, Factories, and Workshops: Or Industry Combined with Agriculture and Brain Work with Manual Work} (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1913); and Kropotkin, \textit{Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution} (London: Heinemann, 1902).} In his 1982 second edition to
Anarchy in Action, Colin Ward described what has turned out to be the continuing problem that faces the anarchist. He states:

The ideas he [sic, an anarchist] is putting forward are so much at variance with ordinary political assumptions, and the solutions he offers are so remote, there is such a gap between what is, and what, according to the anarchist, might be, that his audience cannot take him seriously.¹⁶

There was certainly a risk that the critiques and challenges of the squatters, claimants, battered women, and black radicals would be dismissed as utopian or naïve. As well, the historian who engages with these actors in this way.

In an attempt to construct an anarchist reading of the social movements discussed in this project, I turn now to Colin Ward’s description of anarchism, which I find particularly relevant. Ward regards the state as a kind of relationship between people that becomes rigidly formalized into a series of vested interests that are contrary to the interests of the people.¹⁷ For example, the well-meaning provision of the welfare state became an impenetrable bureaucracy that most people could not fully utilize while it also propped up capitalist exploitation—the prime cause of the “social evils” it sought to control. To counter this and other examples of well-meaning statist policies gone awry or, as was more often the case, the inability or indifference of those responsible to help those in need, I present these different groups as taking direct control of their situation in the immediate term as a way to work toward a better future. Ward explains the anarchist interpretation thus, “far from being a speculative vision of a future society, it [anarchism] is a description of a mode of human organization, rooted in the experience of everyday life, which operates side by side with, and in spite of, the dominant authoritarian trends of our

¹⁷ Ward, 9.
society.” The definition of anarchists that Ward next outlines would be agreed upon by most who either study or subscribe to the philosophy:

Anarchists are people who make a social and political philosophy out of the natural and spontaneous tendency of humans to associate together for their mutual benefit. Anarchism is in fact the name given to the idea that it is possible and desirable for society to organize itself without government.

Using this definition as a starting point, I analyze each group in the chapters that follow. By their insistence upon taking direct responsibility for their lives in situations when those in authority should have (and often they were required to do so by law) or the power holders pursued conflicting ends to a just and harmonious society, each group engaged in basic anarchism. Furthermore, the attempted creation of alternative structures in the spaces left between society and the state is where the dynamic and truly anarchic practices manifested. To reiterate the theory and practice of direct action, these groups acted in ways consistent with their desired ends; therefore, they organized along voluntary mutual aid structures that were horizontal and non-coercive—like the future they envisioned. Finally, Ward argues the state is made up of the powers that society has abdicated. In the four groups to be examined, we can see the attempt among them to reclaim some of those powers from housing, to income, to protection, to equal treatment.

Periodization

While the title gives a period of 1968 to 1985, the bulk of the sources analyzed and events discussed took place during the 1970s. Each subject examined has a fairly clear beginning around the revolutionary year 1968, and most of the sources dry up by the mid-1980s. Lawrence Black reviews five new books about the 1970s and posits that because of
its “lost” nature coming between the explosive excitement of the 1960s and the conservative backlash of the 1980s, it may now be revised to learn lessons relevant to today’s world. Whatever gains in the United Kingdom’s economy between 1950 and 1973, by the mid-1960s, most regarded the economy as failing compared to other industrial powers. The 1970s in Britain witnessed a genuine decline in Britain’s world power status and industrial output as well as the “Troubles” in Northern Ireland, miners’ strikes that brought down a government, over one million unemployed, deadly racial violence, soccer hooligans, and the potentially subversive punk phenomenon. Additionally, fears of nuclear war, American cultural homogenization, three-day weeks, and national capitulations to both the European Community and the International Monetary Fund created for Britain, in its imagination and reality, a national crisis often referred to as its “decline.”

The great historian Eric Hobsbawm speaks about the decades after the post-war boom as the “Crisis decades,” which affected the entire globe with implications relevant to the study of Britain. The immediate post-war order was so successful at creating an integrated and universal world economy (at least for the capitalist countries) that trouble in one part quickly spread to another. The economic contractions of the early 1970s (spurred in part by the end of Bretton Woods and the OPEC oil embargo) were initially thought of as bumps on the road to prosperity. However, eventually more radical solutions

came into political-economic thinking. In Britain, Keynesian planning was gradually replaced by free-market ideologies that cut social spending and denationalized certain industries causing unemployment to rise while shrinking the social safety net. Limited state spending, stagflation, rising prices, and rising militancy of unions resurrected the economic woes that the “Golden Age” of the 1950s had seemingly vanquished: mass unemployment, homelessness, and severe slumps, racial and class-based confrontations.23

However, all of these reasons from the circumscribed global role of Britain to its domestic “ungovernability” made it a hotbed of ideas and movements that draw in one who is interested in alternatives to traditional history writing. They bring to the fore those who Thompson regarded as lost causes, losers, and forgotten.24 Thompson had his “poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the ‘obsolete’ hand-loom weaver, the ‘utopian’ artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott” whom he endeavored to save from the “enormous condensation of posterity.”25 I have my utopian squatters and welfare claimants, uncompromising feminists, and militant black radicals. In the same way, I attempt to reveal the motivations (without condemnation) of each group to behave as they did in terms of the historical context in which they lived. As Thompson proposes, this analysis of actors’ responses to crises that were largely not their fault should not be judged by their sustainability, political success, or social regard in hindsight. I am less concerned with the fact that since the end of this project’s period housing became harder to obtain and less secure than I am with the fact that during its period, squatting not only made sense but got results. Moreover, having spent time in London in 2015-2016, I witnessed how widespread the tactic has remained. In the same way, the eroding of the welfare state

23 Hobsbawm, Age of Extremes.
over the last four decades is not the fault of the militant claimants of the 1970s. One thing I hope this project demonstrates is how much power grassroots activism can have in the short and medium term even when we know they are ultimately unsuccessful. Nor should we judge their actions at the time negatively because they failed to create a user-controlled welfare state or universal minimum income for all in Britain. The literature about Britain’s “decline” posits that many of its troubles were out of British control: so too for the groups examined. What is more historically important are the ways those who decided to take on the challenges within a framework they could understand while also having the courage to try out something new. This is an examination of active participation in one’s life and the life of one’s community. Inaction by those who should have solved the various problems (social workers, the police, the state) caused by deindustrialization, decolonization, patriarchy, and racism prompted the formation of idealistic yet rational and dedicated direct action activists to solve those problems themselves.

Chapter Outline

Chapter one discusses squatting as a direct action solution to the ever-present housing crisis in the United Kingdom. Although the majority of Britons were well-housed, the policies and attitudes towards those who lived in substandard housing were a clear violation of the provisions of the post-war welfare state. For approximately 250,000 Britons over the period covered, squatting was a rational and successful response to this crisis. The act of squatting, that is moving into property that is owned by another person has quite a long history in England. Gerrard Winstanley’s Diggers in the 1640s and the demobilized soldiers moving their families into former army bases after both world wars (e.g., the “Vigilantes” in 1946-7) were both squatters. But the modern squatting movement, which this project analyzes, began in earnest in late 1968 as a direct action response to the amount of publicly and privately owned residential and commercial
properties left to sit empty, sometimes for years, while thousands slept rough and tens to hundreds of thousands languished in decrepit hovels for years while awaiting council housing. Homelessness advocates Ron Bailey and Jim Radford first staged symbolic demonstrations by occupying empty luxury flats, and then started moving families into empty council houses with mostly sympathetic press coverage. After this, many borough-level squatters’ associations formed and began installing families and single people into empty property as well as publishing information in the form of newsletters, guidebooks, and pamphlets explaining the housing situation, what the local authorities’ duties were, and how to squat. Because the housing situation was at a crisis level that the authorities were unable and/or unwilling to address, they eventually began to work with squatters’ groups to do the work of housing officials to house homeless families in licensed squats. These later became housing cooperatives and housing associations. The councils also often rehoused families who squatted into some of their empty properties.

Fissures within the movement itself existed from the beginning and the government and media tried to divide the “deserving” families who only squatted out of desperation from the “undeserving”: those who squatted as an alternative to the market forces of renting or to overturn the power dynamics of tenant and landlord. The squatted spaces in which people lived also often became alternative social centers. This aspect seems to have become more prominent in later years, with the emergence of places like the 121 Railton Road squat in Brixton (1981-1999) which served as an info shop, café, social centre, bookstore, and radical publisher. The 121 Railton Road squat served the community until it was finally, violently evicted by the police and bailiffs in 1999. Other squats throughout the 1980s served as gig venues for a wide variety of music, especially anarcho-punk. In the words of many of the participants, these were a direct challenge to post-industrial capitalism, the work ethic, patriarchy, or the forms of domination experienced by many in the developing underclass of Britons.
Chapter two examines the claimants’ unions as a response to the second national crisis, which has to do with the welfare state itself. The 1942 Beveridge report described a future Britain free from the “giant evils” of squalor, ignorance, want, idleness, and disease. This formed the basis of the three main welfare state acts: The National Insurance Act (1946), The National Assistance Act (1948), and the National Health Services Act (1948). Both Labour and Conservative governments more or less adhered to the maintenance of these Acts. The first chapter already discussed how the implementation of the National Assistance Act was in many ways lacking regarding housing provision, and the second chapter discusses issues related to social security. The Welfare State was envisioned as “cradle to the grave” governmental intervention in the lives of its citizens, ensuring housing, education, health, and provision during sickness, unemployment, old age, or disability. Although this was the ideal, it was rarely the reality for British citizens. The claimants’ union (CU) was a voluntary association of current and former welfare claimants who organized together to demand easier access and more generous payouts from the welfare state. The CUs put a large part of their energy into producing accurate, up-to-date benefits guides, including how much one could claim, how to claim, and how to appeal if one’s claim was denied. Even though these voluntary organizations did the work that the authorities should have done themselves, their literature was not always allowed to be posted in the welfare office. Another of the CU’s biggest activities was to accompany claimants to the welfare office or to their appeal to assist them because the welfare officer or appeal tribunal was very often hostile to the claimant. The CU often occupied offices and refused to leave until a claim was handled. The welfare office clerk was often portrayed as a villain in the literature. The reality was he or she was also under immense pressure from above especially in the late-1960s to 1980s because as Britain’s economic strength declined, so too did the economic and political ability of it to support a robust welfare state. Welfare officials from the DHSS down to the local social security desk clerk were all
compelled to deny as many claims as possible, turn away claimants, cut benefits, or reduce the amount paid out.

The third chapter examines a small faction of the women’s liberation movement. The Women’s Aid Centers, later part of the National Federation of Women’s Aid, provided secure refuges for battered women and advocated for a minimum income to improve the social and cultural position of women in Britain. This chapter expands on some territory covered in chapter two especially regarding the “cohabitation” rule and the general assumptions of welfare state policies that women were wives and mothers and not workers or independent. As discussed in Susan Pedersen's *Family, Dependence, and the Origins of the Welfare State: Britain and France, 1914-1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995) women’s access to welfare state benefits depended on her relation to a male “breadwinner,” perpetuating patriarchal control and women’s dependence. These issues came to a head in the case of battered wives. Many abused women were forced to stay with their abusive partners due to their dependent position. Many women had no income, had no access to emergency council housing, and their Supplementary Benefits or other entitlements could be lost or not cover her expenses because welfare state payouts assumed a male breadwinner. Women’s Aid always promoted a challenge to this aspect of the welfare state, but their main priority was direct action for battered wives. The Chiswick Women’s Aid Refuge was opened in 1971 in a west London squat, the first refuge for battered wives in the world. It was an all-volunteer-run shelter where women could come and stay with no questions asked for as long as they needed. Women’s Aid Centers opened in other boroughs and other cities throughout Britain to provide shelter while supporting women’s access to benefits, employment searches, divorces, and assorted other services as needed. The Chiswick center’s founder, Erin Pizzey, became a national figure who tirelessly raised the issue of battered wives and women’s dependency in England.
Chapter four tackles racism and anti-racism. The chapter will begin with the historical background of black (mostly Afro-Caribbean) minorities in Britain, as both post-colonial immigrants and as native-born British citizens. The chapter then analyzes black, and to a lesser extent Asian, British radical activism. It will begin with the late 1960s-early 1970s Black Power Movement in Britain, which included Maoists, Black Panthers, and others who worked in solidarity with national liberation movements in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. From this more revolutionary and largely theoretical movement, the chapter will turn to the Black Student’s and Black Parent’s Movements (BSM and BPM), which were involved with anti-police brutality campaigns, legal defense cases, and large-scale demonstrations. The 1981 riots originating in Brixton will also be discussed, but more attention will be given to the unsolved massacre of thirteen young people after a firebombing in New Cross earlier that year. This massacre led to a movement (helped by BPM) resulting in a “Black People’s Day of Action” with 25,000 people marching through London on 2 March 1981. Alongside these advocacy movements, related black culture and political identity developed. The George Padmore Institute and Supplementary School was one of several alternative centers for black cultural education and community building. I argue that all these diverse organizations and campaigns coalesced into the self-confidence and militant activism that exploded on the streets of the early 1980s. The continued harassment and violence by police and private racists was the conflict around which a unified and strengthened black political consciousness in Britain formed.
Chapter I  
Squatting: The Fight for Decent Shelter, 1968-1985  
“Homes fit for heroes, deposits not returned”  
--Edgar Broughton Band, 1972

During the twenty years after the Second World War, many in the west began to regard housing as a basic right. The British welfare state included policies and provisions to provide decent shelter for all its citizens. This chapter focuses on the period ca.1968-1985, because this was a time in England when the lack of affordable, secure-tenured housing reached a crisis level while the central and local governmental housing policies received wider scrutiny for their ineffectiveness. I argue that despite post-war laws and rhetoric, many Britons lived through a housing disaster, and for many the most rational way they could solve their housing needs was to exploit legal loopholes as well as break the law through squatting. Squatters were both “deserving” deprived families and menacing “folk devils.”

However, many of the squatters involved in this historical moment were rather ordinary people who made difficult decisions that put them into conflict with authorities and in opposition to capitalist commodification of housing. Meanwhile, others explicitly saw their squatting as a means to overthrow capitalism and private property, quite naively but also quite earnestly and understandably. Furthermore, squatting was an implicit as well as explicit confrontation with the social and political forces that left homes empty and millions of people badly housed or homeless.

While it was true that some squatters liked to imagine themselves as anti-capitalist revolutionaries, the houses squatted and the money available to create these alternative

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26 Although I am not specifically arguing that squatters were a subculture, I think Stanley Cohen’s analysis of how the media can generate a “moral panic” about certain groups who are then vilified by the larger community far beyond their actual threat to society is instructive when considering the squatter phenomenon. See Stanley Cohen, Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of Mods and Rockers (London: Routledge, 2002).
spaces only existed—necessarily—because of Britain’s welfare capitalism. However, I do not mean to diminish the desperation that homeless or badly housed people felt in their circumstances by pointing out flaws in their idealism. It is also not my intention to deny the sincerity of their choices. When faced with homelessness, poor housing, or living for extended periods in overcrowded hostels, it could seem quite reasonable to break into an empty property and set up a home. It is also understandable to develop a rationalization that these empty properties should be given over to the homeless or poorly housed without too much analysis of how that might be sustainable in the long term. Rather than dismissing the ideals and actions of squatters as simply law-breaking free riders who childishly thought housing and community were entitled to them, a more useful analysis will be to try to understand why “their aspirations were valid in terms of their own experience” to quote E.P. Thompson.27 In part, this involves taking their rhetoric and actions seriously as rational, albeit unsustainable, and often illegal or even unethical means to handle the desperate situation they and the larger society faced.

**Historiography and Theory**

The historiography of the English squatting movement mostly consists of the writings of those who took part such as Ron Bailey’s 1973 classic *The Squatters* and Nick Wates’ fabulous compendium of 1980, *Squatting: The Real Story*.28 These works provide incredible first-hand insight as well as a bit of historical perspective and make up a large part of the source material for this chapter. Bailey and Wates argue that squatting was both a way to address the housing crisis and a method of organizing poor people to make other wider-ranging demands. There is also substantial scholarly attention paid to squatting outside of

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England, especially in Amsterdam, and this fortunately often makes comparisons with the English movement.29 The Squatting Europe Kollective’s 2013 edited work, *Squatting in Europe: Radical Spaces, Urban Struggles*, theorizes and historicizes the movement by analyzing different features of squatting in different spatial and historical settings. Margit Mayer argues in the preface that squatting is a tactic to improve the housing situation either as individuals or as part of a larger social movement. In general, organized squatters networked with other social movements or advocacy groups (e.g., for housing or environment) and made demands on the state for affordable housing and usable public spaces and social infrastructure. Squatters then utilized the occupied spaces for self-organization, self-management, and empowerment for many social, political, or counter-cultural activities.30 For many, moreover, the act of squatting was a two-part experience: the initial civil or legal disobedience of breaking into a space, and then using it to develop alternative social, political, or cultural ideals and practices, from Do-It-Yourself (DIY) carpentry to political radicalism. Once a squatter had already broken the taboo of trespassing, Mayer seems to argue, the possibility of questioning and challenging other customs and laws became more probable. Hans Pruijt created a five-point typology of squatters: deprivation-based, an alternative housing strategy, entrepreneurial, conservational, and political.31 The primary source material, not surprisingly, shows that many squatters could be all of these things at different times and to different degrees. However, most English squatters would fit the “deprivation-based” typology during this time because the majority simply wanted a home and were unable to access one through the official channels.

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In order to understand the emergence of the squatters in the late 1960s, it is helpful to consider E.P. Thompson’s “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,” specifically his analysis of the notion of “legitimatization.”

According to Thompson, food riots were not merely “rebellions of the belly” but were enforcements of popular and traditional views of market practices and social norms and obligations. When dismantling a paternalist-providing economic model that set the price of bread to create a laissez-faire economy, not all consumers happily accepted the change. Thompson presents the English crowd as “setting a fair price” against the market which was profiting off a necessity, especially in times of dearth. The “riots” were actually highly organized events, appealed to concepts of the commonweal, and took the form of enforcing, with state power on occasion, what people considered a moral price for a necessity.

We might consider the squatters’ movement that began in the 1960s as a legitimization process to correct what they felt were violations of the commonweal that should provide for basic needs.

Furthermore, as Alberto Melucci argues in Social Research, new social movements—in which I categorize squatting—are not organized “instrumental’ for their goals. [They are organized as] a goal in itself.” The squatters most often organized horizontally for direct participation by all members. Anarchists would recognize this as using anarchist means to reach anarchist ends. If anarchists thought empty houses were a symbol of unjust political or economic planning, then the most suitable way to address the issue would be to squat because it provided immediate solutions, housing, while also symbolically attacking the

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unjust status-quo conditions. Despite the fact that this was obviously naïve, it is my goal to show that given the macro-realities (the assumption that the welfare-state will intervene on behalf of its citizens’ material needs, housing shortages, raising rents, poor housing conditions, etc.), the squatters—whether anarchists or not—could claim the moral high ground by challenging the housing status quo regarded by many as infeasible.

The modern squatters’ movement developed out of other direct action social movements over the course of the 1960s. The first squatters in late 1968 had previously been members of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament’s “Committee of 100” and the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign. Writing in 1976, renowned anarchist and housing activist Colin Ward described an anarchist approach to housing called “dweller control” that seemed to at least consider what the squatters wanted: to make major decisions about the design, construction, and management of their housing and the environment in which they lived. 36 The squatters were involved in taking over already existing houses, so they did not have complete control and they did not fundamentally change the housing industry. Nevertheless, they highlighted what they considered an unfair public housing allocation process as well as conditions they found unacceptable, especially in the private market.

Surveys of squatters conducted by the housing charity Shelter found 60 percent became squatters because there was a lack of affordable housing in the areas in which they wanted to live. Protest against the housing crisis, communal living, and increased free time were cited as the next most common reasons. 37 Other studies found the overall reason most people squatted was that they needed somewhere to live, followed by their desire to live with more personal autonomy than in their current situation. Most squatters spent time homeless

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or in the homeless accommodations provided by councils that were anything but home sweet home. Accordingly, Ward saw the squatters as taking personal responsibility for their housing needs as part of a larger movement of direct action community activism that anarchists have long proposed in all spheres of life. Under a welfare capitalist state such as post-war Britain, housing became another commodity system, which subjected citizens to either market or governmental providers, as it did with education, welfare, and health care.\textsuperscript{38} Squatters must have realized that the state and market were not adequately meeting their housing needs, and like anarchists, even if not self-identified, they protested that situation by directly attempting to fix it themselves.

\textit{Housing under Welfare-State Capitalism: Rhetoric and Reality}

In relating the moral economy of the crowd to squatting, it is important to consider that the post-war generation regarded a paternalist-state model of provision for housing as a right. The National Assistance Act (1948) was the first significant piece of post-war homelessness legislation, and declared that every local authority had “the duty… to provide temporary accommodation for persons in urgent need thereof, being in need arising in circumstances which could not reasonably have been foreseen, or in any other circumstances as the authority may in any particular case determine.”\textsuperscript{39} This Act empowered and required local authorities to provide housing for their homeless. Local authorities had to use all existing council property to house people as well as build or requisition additional structures as needed. If necessary, councils could buy private houses or other buildings and convert them into public housing in a process known as “municipalization.” As the larger fiscal

\textsuperscript{38} Ward, \textit{Housing}, 8-9.
\textsuperscript{39} National Assistance Act 1948 Part III, Section 21(1)(b). Because local authorities provided temporary housing to the homeless under the provisions of Part III of the Act, this housing became known as “Part III Accommodation.”
circumstances of Britain began to contract, so too did public resources for housing. When they could not find enough public accommodation, local authorities utilized the housing of voluntary organizations, like the Salvation Army, but this was only an emergency solution to a bigger problem. Post-war governments of both parties committed themselves to building enough council houses to house all Britons, but the number of houses built in the public or private sphere never reached the numbers needed. Despite this practical dilemma, the post-war generation came to expect fit houses for all as a basic right.

At its peak, nearly 200,000 houses were built each year under the 1964-1970 Labour government of Harold Wilson. In 1966, Wilson empowered the Central Housing Advisory Committee to commission a study to ascertain objective criteria for minimum standards of habitability in order to recommend slum clearance, repairs, etc. According to the study, fit houses should be in a good state of repair and free from damp, have indoor toilets and baths with hot and cold running water, and have suitable access to electricity, heat, and water as well as several other provisions. Many houses did not meet this standard of fitness.

According to a 1965 Housing Ministry Circular (no. 11/65), 771,000 houses or 824,000 dwellings were unfit by the standard outlined by the committee. A report published in 1968 paints a bleaker picture: about 1.8 million unfit dwellings, 1.1 million of them in slums. There were 13.9 million fit dwellings, but 3.7 million of those needed repairs costing £125 or more and 2.3 million lacked one or more of the following: indoor toilets, fixed baths, washbasins, and/or hot and cold water systems. Altogether about 4.5 million fit houses needed repairs of £125 or more, lacked basic amenities, or both. Conditions tended to be

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worse in the North and in private-let housing. By the late-1960s, in part thanks to charities like Shelter and the film *Cathy Come Home*, many in Britain would have considered that the government was not fully realizing the housing goals set by its legislation and rhetoric, and the squatters emerged partially in response to this feeling.

The changes in capitalism during this period also helped to catalyze the squatting movement. From 1945 to the mid-1960s, the average worker could expect full-time employment producing a tangible product in addition to a welfare state that provided basic material needs while keeping them afloat during periods of market slump or unemployment. With deindustrialization, workers’ wages and work experiences depended on providing services or producing non-durable consumer goods at the same time their material needs became commodified. The slum clearances of the 1950s and 1960s improved the hygiene and standard of living for many working-class Britons. At the same time, they fractured communities and atomized people in tower blocks or far away in new suburban estates. Successive post-war governments of both parties agreed that building family homes for council tenancies or owner occupation was the most desirable way forward for British housing, but this squeezed non-families as well as those who could not afford a down payment into an increasingly blighted private sector. Single people living full-time in hostels and whole families living in one-bedroom private flats was an increasingly common reality by the late 1960s. Moreover, from 1965 onward decontrol of rent meant market-based

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43 Franklin, 15.
“economic rents” rose from about 20 percent to nearly 40 percent of the average worker’s wages.\footnote{44}{Steve Hilditch et al., \textit{Ordinary People: Homeless in the Housing Crisis}, (London: Shelter, 1982), 32.}

If squatters can be said to have an ideology (which presents its own problems due to the diversity and loose organization of squatters into a “movement”), it would be that housing needs should come before profits and that housing should be as equitably distributed as possible.\footnote{45}{Franklin, 37-38.} Unfortunately, the downward pressure created by Britain’s relative economic decline and move away from Keynesianism resulted in a push for those responsible for administering the welfare state to deny as many applicants as possible to save funds. Some housing officials were indifferent bureaucrats, but many were well-meaning civil servants simply compelled by the lack of resources and complicated allocation procedures to deny housing for many people who could legally or reasonably be considered in need. The moral economy of the squatters was in the attempts, often unsuccessful, of many squatters to pay rents and rates based on what they considered reasonable given over twenty years of rent controls, rent rebates and rate allowances provided by the government. In addition, when the official channels to securing housing failed, the squatters who had thought of housing as a right, simply moved into empty houses. The early squatters, like the eighteenth-century crowd, enjoyed public support when they framed their actions as countering the profit motive of private property owners or as an attempt to pressure the local authorities to more efficiently and equitably distribute their housing stock. While it is hard to generalize, squatters emerged more as a challenge to the legitimacy of neoliberalism’s push toward atomization and marketization of housing rather than as a sustainable attempt to overthrow private property.\footnote{46}{See Franklin, 2-3.}
The squatters’ challenge grew into a loosely organized social movement during the 1970s. Alain Touraine writes in his “Introduction to the Study of Social Movements” that there is almost general agreement that social movements are a special kind of social conflict. On the one hand, the squatters and tenants wanted houses as a basic right and wanted decent housing at a payment level they could afford—and if this was not forthcoming, they considered direct action as a just solution. On the other hand, the property owners, councils, and government considered housing as a planned and profitable commodity. Economic and political expediency led to millions of inadequate houses, tens of thousands of empty houses, and tens of thousands of people left to rot in “temporary accommodation.” These ideological choices happened in the context of governments failing to meet their own targets for house building. The squatters’ movement fell into what Touraine described as a social movement that seeks social control of the main cultural patterns. While the vast majority of squatters simply wanted a place to live, many squatters explicitly stated their goals as challenging the housing market and taking housing out of the control of political and market forces. The fact that state or private capital built these houses certainly limits the strength of their argument but does not invalidate the critique that housing was not equitably distributed. Due to welfare-state ideals and rising expectations among the post-war generation, it is not surprising that poor housing conditions, homelessness, and empty houses provoked a direct-action movement to fill them.

*Homelessness Defined*

The Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977 finally codified a homelessness definition. This was necessary because without a statutory definition of homelessness many

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48 Touraine, 754-755.
people could be denied homeless accommodations if their council did not consider them homeless. The definition of “homeless” was actually nothing too special. What is of more interest are the categories of “priority need” and “intentionally homeless” because they established legal ways for councils to deny housing to people even if they met the definition of homelessness. “Priority need” meant the homeless person

has dependent children who are residing with him [sic] or might reasonably be expected to reside with him […] is homeless or threatened with homelessness as a result of any emergency such as flood, fire, or any other disaster […] as a result of old age, mental illness or handicap [sic] or physical disability or other special reason […] a pregnant woman.

This definition left out single people without children of all ages, just like the 1977 Act did. This group always had difficulty getting into council houses. It is no wonder then that many squatters were single young people, whether counter-cultural radicals or not, because their housing options were so limited.

“Intentional homeless” meant that even if a person met the definition of homeless and priority need, if the local authorities could claim the person became homeless “intentionally,” then the local authority was under no obligation to accommodate or assist that person. The homelessness charity, Shelter, opined about these people: “no one knows what happens to these families or where they go and virtually no one cares.” Being “intentionally homeless” included going into rent arrears, meaning if one became homeless for moving out of an expensive flat, the council was not responsible for rehousing. Another cause would be if a person moved out of a friend or relative’s house without the owner

49 he [sic] has no accommodation […] cannot secure entry to it […] occupation of it will lead to violence […] it consists of a movable structure, vehicle or vessel designed or adapted for human habitation and there is no place where he is entitled or permitted both to place it and to reside in it (Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977 s. 1(1)(a-b)(2)(a-c)).

50 Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977, s. 2(1)(a-b)(2)

51 Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977, s. 3 (1)(a-b)

52 Hilditch, 20.
formally evicting them. Shelter documented a number of cases involving people leaving their homes in Northern Ireland to escape sectarian violence only to be denied homelessness assistance on the mainland because they willingly left their secure tenure and were thus “intentionally homeless.”

Relatedly, many people left their homes to search for better work opportunities elsewhere as Britain’s unemployment crisis worsened. These people were “intentionally homeless” and their problems only worsened in the likely event of their not finding employment. The last common cause was perhaps the most disturbing. Due to the pressure on councils to deny housing to homeless people, they often employed a “take it or leave it” policy when offering accommodation. If a family or person refused the first accommodation offered, no matter how inadequate, the council would declare them “intentionally homeless” and no longer the council’s responsibility.

In 1978, 830 families were declared “intentionally homeless” and in 1981, the number rose to 1,500.

A last note about homelessness is the distinction between “homeless” and “houseless.” This is not a simple semantic issue, but concerns the rising expectations of the post-war generation. Few would seriously doubt the homelessness of a person sleeping under a bridge. However, according to the law a family of four living in one room in a hostel and sharing the kitchen and toilet with six other families was not homeless. The room could be statutorily unfit for human habitation or overcrowded and still the family was not legally homeless, meaning the authorities had no duty to assist. The push toward council housing, including slum clearances, and the popular appeal of gleaming new houses with indoor toilets and front gardens, meant many people, understandably, desired a certain standard of

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53 As will be shown in chapter three, much the same attitude was shown to battered wives who left their marital home.
fitness for their homes. As has been described, this was partially due to Housing Ministry publications but also to an overall age of affluence that replaced the early post-war years of austerity. This wider definition considers the home as a quiet and relaxing refuge from a competitive world. It is a place of peace and security. It should be free from dampness, which, given England’s climate, was a constant threat along with the associated risks of mold or bacterial growth, which could cause bronchitis or asthma that may not remit even after moving to a drier dwelling. In addition, the individual’s constant strain of shared facilities, insecure tenure, disrepair, or infestation contributes to a housing experience so bad that Shelter and others called this “homelessness”. This is striking, since the social and political discourse of the time continually presented Britons as the best housed nation in the world. The reality of thousands of homeless people in overcrowded, damp, and dangerous “temporary” accommodation that lacked basic amenities, needed major repairs, or was legally unfit for human habitation was a concrete problem that sparked the squatters’ movement in 1968.

**How People Become Homeless**

Three factors contributed to homelessness and made squatting an appealing alternative in the 1960s-1980s: shortage of housing, cost of housing, and allocation of housing. The historical context of these factors was what historians have variously characterized as Britain’s “decline” or “the end of consensus.” A genuine decline in Britain’s industrial competitiveness along with the economic crisis born out of the 1973

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56 See also Peter Townsend, *Poverty in the United Kingdom* (London: Penguin, 1979), 31, for a definition of relative poverty which can be usefully applied to the definition of homelessness.

OPEC oil embargo—both of which contributed to the unemployment of over one million Britons—meant the British state became less able to provide cradle-to-the-grave welfare for all its citizens. Moreover, conservative monetarist ideology began to target the welfare state as part of the reason for Britain’s crises and so began a theoretical-cum-practical dismantling of the welfare state in the years leading up to and including the Thatcher governments. Britain’s social housing was among the sectors strongly affected by this change. Additionally, a study conducted by the Center for Environmental Studies over 1977-1980 found an important association between Britain’s industrial decline and increased homelessness.\(^{58}\)

Many people lived in tied accommodation, and when they lost their job, they lost their housing.\(^{59}\) Loss of tied accommodation ranks high in many studies about the homeless during this period and further links homelessness to Britain’s relative economic decline. Moreover, because thousands of families lived in hostels, bed and breakfasts, hotels, or insecure-tenured private flats, an inevitably high number of people lost their shelters each year and became homeless. However, the pernicious cycle of people needing to double up with friends and relatives and then being kicked out of those accommodations to face even less housing options caused the most homelessness.\(^{60}\)

Clement Atlee’s Labour government built nearly a million houses, mostly to replace those destroyed in the war. The Conservative governments of the 1950s continued this building campaign, but toward the end of the decade, focused more on slum clearance than new building. Slum clearances would rehouse some families into the new cheaply built—and

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59 Ron Bailey and Joan Ruddock, The Grief Report: A Shelter Report on Temporary Accommodation (London: Shelter, 1972), 128. Tied accommodations were housing provided with a particular job, such as hotel workers living at the hotel or farm workers living in a cottage on the property. In the early part of the period under review, tied accommodation was nearly always lost when the job was lost, immediately increasing the hardships exponentially.  
60 Bailey and Ruddock, 163.
later despised—“brutalist” towers of flats or in suburban housing estates. These accommodations often soon became new slums and fractured long-established communities. They also made the housing provision for all less secure, less accessible, and simply less like home. Sixty-seven percent of Inner London residents lived in private accommodation, one-fifth of it unfit for human habitation (compared to one percent of council flats or 3.8 percent of owner occupied), and were four times as likely to lack an indoor toilet, bath, or hot water. The government declared a “crude surplus” of houses in the mid-1970s. This surplus included many houses that were unfit for human habitation, overcrowded, badly in need of repair, or lacking in one or more basic amenities such as an indoor toilet or hot water as well as second homes or homes temporarily empty for repairs or tenants moving. A Shelter report states there were over a quarter million more households than houses available in 1972 London. Between 1976 and 1981, Britain suffered an astounding shortage of 300,000-900,000 houses. In 1976, the British government had to cut its spending on housing to satisfy the terms of its loan from the International Monetary Fund, a so-called structural readjustment. Between 1979 and 1986, the government cut spending on housing by 60 percent, more than on any other program. Land speculation and the habit of both private landlords and councils to leave houses empty, sometimes for years, meant the two decades covered in this chapter were a time of not only shortage but of a genuine housing disaster for many Britons.

The second main reason for homelessness was the increased cost of housing. The average rent for a house in 1914 would have consumed about 18 percent of the average worker’s wages. When the government controlled rents after World War Two, this number

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62 Bailey and Ruddock, 117; Hilditch et al., 31.
63 Sheila and Wilson, 20
remained about the same. In the mid-1960s, rent decontrol began, in part because the
government wanted to encourage owner-occupation and council housing. The result was a
decrease of controlled rents from 1.9 million in 1965 to 375,000 in 1976. By 1976, it took 36
percent of the average worker’s wages to rent a dwelling.\(^6^4\) A typical rent in 1976 would be
£20-£30 per week, yet the average worker’s wage was £25 per week gross, with 10 percent
of workers making less than £10 per week gross. The welfare state provided rent allowances
to make up this difference, while government subsidies should have topped up a
household’s income to cover rent and other housing expenses. However, rent allowances,
like all other welfare benefits during this period, had a shockingly low take-up. According to
Shelter, nearly two-thirds of all people eligible to receive rent allowances did not apply for
them.\(^6^5\) In some cases, families could go into rent arrears and be evicted because they were
unaware of eligible rent subsidies. Moreover, the average rent allowances in 1976 were £6.50
outside London and £8.00 inside London, hardly enough to cover the cost.\(^6^6\) Rising rents
and inadequate financial help from the government meant tens of thousands of families
could not afford a decent house while millions of people lived in very inadequate dwellings.
Meanwhile, the taxpayers gave £2.5 million per year in the 1970s to maintain the Royal
Family’s many houses, or about enough to have built 25,000 houses between Queen
Elizabeth II’s coronation in 1953 and her Silver Jubilee in 1977.\(^6^7\)

The allocation of housing in Britain was a complicated affair. Furthermore, housing
people is not a simple matter of having an equal ratio of houses to families, but of having

\(^{6^4}\) Hilditch et al., 32.

\(^{6^5}\) Shelter, *The Future of Private Rented Housing*, 16.

\(^{6^6}\) Shelter, *The Future of Private Rented Housing*, 14. Some families were able to appeal their eviction and claim the rent allowance, and then move back into their former home.

them in the right place, at an affordable price, in the right size, and in good condition. The government intended council houses for nuclear families, but the changing demographics of England produced a move toward a larger number of smaller households. Housing officials never adequately handled this changing reality of household composition and population growth. Families with children would quickly get into a house while unmarried and childless young people likely would not. The private sector provided accommodation for the majority of those without access to council housing. Once the majority sector of British housing, over the period 1951-80 private accommodation declined from 54 percent to just 13 percent.

As previously mentioned, studies found most private rentals were in a terrible state of disrepair, might charge prohibitively high deposits, were severely overcrowded (due to the high demand but continually low supply), and even the Rent Tribunals did not prevent rent rises or evictions. The government also redistributed resources in order to encourage owner-occupation, meaning it allocated fewer resources to the rental sector for allowances, repairs, or new building.

Lastly, there were thousands of empty houses in Britain. Constructing a clear explanation as to why houses were left empty is a difficult task. Private property owners or corporations making an investment would leave houses empty waiting for a more favorable market. This usually meant a landlord would sell the house to be bulldozed and rebuilt as a more profitable commercial property. Councils also left houses empty so they could sell them for redevelopment. The empty houses in the public sector could be the result of simple incompetence or indifference to those in need of housing, but, more often, it was due to the

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69 McKechnie and Wilson, 20.
70 Hilditch et al., 32.
expansion of state responsibilities—e.g., larger number of smaller households to be housed by councils—at a time of declining revenues. In cases such as Redbridge and Villa Road (discussed below), the council began evictions before the redevelopment plan was even approved, resulting in good houses left empty for up to ten years. Demolition and redevelopment plans that failed to get funding to finish the job were the most common reasons councils left public housing empty. The squatters, seeing this as unjust in the presence of so many homeless people, began occupying these empty houses and in many cases were able to arrange short-life housing schemes or even convince the council to hand over the houses to squatters who would rehabilitate them and put them into use as low-income, student, or homeless housing.

Continuing the Poor Law Mentality

Once a family lost their accommodation, the local authority in which they lived was supposed to provide them with temporary accommodation until it could find permanent housing. The official homeless numbers were those accepted as “homeless” by their local authorities and placed into temporary accommodation, as recorded on their H-41 Form. A great number of people fell through the cracks in this system. Shelter found an alarmingly wide gap between families who applied for accommodation and those who the council admitted to it (see chart 1).\(^71\) In the years immediately surrounding the passage of the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act (1977), the gap was narrowed, but the numbers of people left out was still significant (see chart 1).\(^72\)

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\(^{71}\) Bailey and Ruddock, 21 and 28.  
\(^{72}\) Billecliffe et al., 26.
Those who did not apply, those who “made other arrangements,” and those not considered homeless by the authorities were also missing from the H-41 forms. According to Shelter, in 1981 there were 100,000 houses unfit for human habitation and 900,000 people living in extreme overcrowding in England.\(^7^3\) Those who lived in these conditions could reasonably be considered homeless, yet their numbers were not listed in the official statistics. The 1977 Act did not change the reality that living in unfit, overcrowded, and/or insecure accommodations were not credentials to make one declared legally homeless. The increase in homelessness designations hides the fact that councils did not solve these instances of insufficient housing as they put many of those accepted as homeless into “temporary accommodations” such as hostels and bed and breakfasts—instead of housing them in permanent council housing—just as they were before the Act.

The 1948 Act did not sanction the practice of putting families into for-profit hotel accommodation. However, when a homeless family came to a council with no

\(^7^3\) McKechnie and Wilson, 10.
accommodations of its own, the council would telephone all the local guesthouses until they could find one with a room. Sometimes this meant a civil servant spent hours on the telephone diligently trying to keep a family off the streets. Other times, this was the council delegating its responsibility to the private sector. At a time when rents could be shillings to a few pounds a week, paying £5 or more per night for a guesthouse bordered on the obscene. Moreover, because the councils were responsible for providing temporary accommodation to their homeless population, the ratepayers ultimately footed the bill. Housing the homeless in hotels was justified as a temporary emergency solution. For many homeless families, however, their stay in “temporary accommodation” could stretch for months and sometimes years. Increasingly, the councils would establish relationships with hotel owners, some of whom changed their business model completely from accommodating tourists and holidaymakers to exclusively housing homeless families at the tax and ratepayers’ expense.74 When councils sent their homeless families to these accommodations, public monies went to hoteliers’ profits instead of building or maintaining houses. By 1986, London councils spent £26 million on bed and breakfast accommodation for homeless families, or about enough to maintain about 5,000 homes.75

When the council contracted with voluntary or commercial entities to provide homeless accommodations, these lodgings were supposed to meet the minimum criteria of council-provided homeless hostel.76 Shelter investigated many for-profit accommodations that clearly failed to meet this standard. The Petar Bajic Properties had 45 rooms at £4-5.50 per night used by the London Boroughs of Brent, Chelsea, Ealing, and Kensington. They told Shelter

75 McKechnie and Wilson, 35.
76 National Assistance Act 1948 Part III, Section 21(1)(b). Because local authorities provided temporary housing to the homeless under the provisions of Part III of the Act, this housing became known as “Part III Accommodation.”
“we are in it to make money. It’s good business, but not a goldmine.”77 The hotels were dirty with mice and cockroaches, missing bannisters, and had holes in the ceiling. The managers admitted they had no Fire Certificate as required under the 1971 Fire Precautions Act. To their credit, Bajic Properties put effort and expenses into improving the properties, including £7,000 for October and November 1974. Of course, all these expenses for improvements would likely result in their ability to charge higher rents. One remarkable comment by the Bajic managers was their desire to get out of the homelessness business: “We can’t stand the strain. We’ve seen families physically deteriorate. We are going to tell the Councils they should find somewhere else for families who have been here a long time.”78 Shelter did not confirm if Bajic Properties got out of the homelessness business. Regardless of whether or not they did, plenty of other of hoteliers continued to stay in the business; a 24 June 2015 article by The Guardian reports nearly 50,000 families living in bed and breakfast accommodation in England.79

Whether or not the private lodgings were structurally nice places to live, many of them clearly maintained the poor law attitudes toward the homeless as illustrated in a sampling of statements by the welfare officers to hostel inmates reported to Ron Bailey:

It’s not our fault you’re here, you know, you’ve no one to blame for it but yourselves, you should have worked harder, shouldn’t have started a family before you saved up to buy a house, and that accident is no excuse [...] just because your husband threw you out that’s not our fault, and even though the landlady wouldn’t take you with that second child, you should have taken precautions, or exercised some self-control [...] There are plenty of people who are worse off than you [...] if you break the rules we can turn you out and then you’ll have nowhere to go and you know what that means [my italics].80

77 Bailey and Evans, 35-36.
78 Bailey and Evans, 36.
80 Bailey, The Squatter, 10.
Clearly, placing families in privately run hostels, which did not meet the welfare requirement of adequate accommodation, meant the local authorities were violating the 1948 Act as well as the general guidelines provided by the central government. The attitudes expressed by the welfare officers at these hostels also violated the spirit of both the 1948 Act and the whole welfare state project, which meant to offer full protection from want and misery without shame or discrimination—to abolish both the Poor Laws and the “Poor Law Mentality.”

The previous sections describe the state of the housing crisis in Britain during the late-1960s to early-1970s as a means to explain what the squatters attempted to overcome. The housing crisis was a combination of genuine shortage, economic and political expediency and ideology, declining public revenue devoted to housing, and demographic changes. While the majority of Britons were well housed and happy with their housing situation, the squatters emerged because a significant number of people fell through the cracks in the housing system and were likely never going to be helped despite beneficial legislation and positive political rhetoric. The presence of poverty in a wealthy nation and the unaffordability of good houses, as well as the number of houses left empty when thousands were homeless or badly housed, was seen as unjust by many Britons. Squatting emerged simultaneously as a method to house people and as a way to challenge the commodification of housing. Many squatters invoked popular concepts relating to the common weal or fair distribution, which often gave them both sympathy and public legitimacy.

*Continuing Traditions*

The long history of English squatting begins with the 1381 Forcible Entry Act. In part, this Act protected unauthorized occupants of land or houses from violent eviction, and it was still in force when squatting reached its height in the mid-1970s. Gerrard Winstanley and his band of Diggers who took over Surrey estates in the 1640s intended to both make
unused land productive for food but also to overturn the whole concept of buying and selling the necessities that allowed some men to lord over others. The eighteenth century English crowd continued to hold that profiteering was illegitimate. An undeniable, nearly legendary, animus between landlord and tenant, owner and consumer has existed for centuries in Britain. In the terms put forth by Thompson, we can try to understand the modern squatters as engaged in a continuing tradition but in a new context.  

In 1915, 30,000 women-led tenants in Glasgow refused to pay raised rents because they regarded the landlords as profiteering during wartime. The tenants agreed to pay the regular rent rate, and their refusal to pay the higher rent resulted in the passage of a Rent Restriction Act, which froze rents to pre-war levels during the war. In 1938, rent strikes in Bethnal Green and Mile End won repayment of rents over the restriction rate and lower future rents. Many other successful rent strikes around London followed these examples. Three hundred and forty Brady Street tenants barricaded homes and fought landlords for twenty-one weeks, at the end of which they secured a rent reduction, return of evicted tenants and an agreement to thousands of pounds of repairs. The fear of strike was so high that landlords began voluntarily lowering rents and offering to make repairs. In the summer of 1945, the “Vigilantes,” a group of demobilized soldiers, began a campaign of moving the families of soldiers first into disused military camps, and then into empty houses at night. These houses were mainly owned by absentee landlords, especially in the resort towns of Hastings and Brighton. The Vigilante movement developed into an attack on the rights of landlords to keep property empty most of the year to cash in during summer while many

82 Ward, *Housing*, 16.
ordinary residents were left homeless or badly housed. The Vigilantes forced the local authorities to use their powers of requisition to buy up empty properties to use as ordinary housing. In 1959, the Conservative council of St. Pancras, London, attempted to raise council rents to the level of private rents, sparking a nine-month rent strike by tenants that the police suppressed with violence.\textsuperscript{84} In slightly different contexts, the 1965 husbands’ occupations of King Hill Hostel in Kent and Abridge Hostel in Essex of the following year were also successful uses of direct action to change what they considered intolerable living conditions. These homeless shelters did not allow husbands to stay with their families, only allowed people to stay for three months, and threatened to take children into care if one could not find alternative accommodation.\textsuperscript{85} A twelve-month occupation by husbands with widespread community support forced King Hill to change its policies. The occupation of Abridge, “the worst shithole this side of hell,”\textsuperscript{86} eventually shut it down completely.

In November 1966, \textit{Cathy Come Home} aired for the first time. The film was a realistic docudrama that followed Cathy, her new husband Reg, and their children as they fell from their newlywed happiness in a modern home to an increasingly bleak existence of struggling to find shelter after Reg lost his job and the bailiffs evicted them. The film depicted the plight of homeless people who had to deal with indifferent welfare officials while trying to find shelter by squatting, moving in with relatives, or living on a Traveler caravan site. Eventually Cathy and Reg split up and their children were put into care, both of which were unfortunately common occurrences for people who lost their homes in the late 1960s. The film’s depiction of homelessness shocked the British public who had hitherto believed such

\textsuperscript{85} Bailey, \textit{The Squatter}, 11 and 25.
\textsuperscript{86} Bailey, 15.
deprivation was a problem of the past. *Cathy Come Home* sparked widespread sympathy and the desire to do something. Still, that month 150,000 people were on London council house waiting lists, and 13,000 people were in temporary accommodation; despite the film’s success, those numbers increased over the next two years. By 1972, 21,000 were in temporary accommodation. These numbers do not include the 1.8 million *families* in housing unfit for human habitation, the three million *families* in slums, or the two million *families* in houses in bad need of repair.\(^87\) In total, 6.8 million Britons were poorly housed in the late 1960s. They could be like Maggie O’Shannon who had a room in Notting Hill, London, where sewage came up through the floorboards or like places in Stepney during the same time where there was no running water or toilet facilities and no electricity in the rooms. Both of these examples are from 1969!\(^88\) Dampness and cold made bronchitis, skin diseases, lung infections, arthritis, and general illness a constant reality for millions of Britons.

Between 1966 and 1968, social services took about 5,000 children a year into care due to the homelessness or poor housing of their parents. *Cathy Come Home* put homelessness on the public agenda and raised sympathy at the time that charities like Shelter took off, however, homelessness, poor housing, and “temporary accommodation” nightmares continued to persist.

Housing activist Ron Bailey and some friends were inspired to act after watching the third airing of *Cathy Come Home* on 14 November 1968. They were involved in King Hill, Abridge, and other hostel occupations. Bailey wrote that they, The London Squatters’ Campaign, more or less agreed to four central goals. First, they tried to rehouse homeless families from hostels and slums into empty houses. Next, they planned to spark a mass

\(^{87}\) Bailey, 19.

\(^{88}\) Bailey, 17.
squatting movement made up of widespread small actions that could win. Then, they wanted to inspire ordinary people to take initiative for themselves and directly challenge the housing authorities. Finally, they sought to radicalize other movements in housing.\textsuperscript{89} The London Squatters’ Campaign reprinted Ward’s 1946 \textit{War Commentary} articles in 1969, strongly linking the two movements under Ward’s theoretical analysis. Bailey stated, “Mass action by ordinary people—the millions who suffer from housing shortage—was not something that I advocated as a revolutionary tactic, but something which had become the only way these people could hope to get a decent house.”\textsuperscript{90} The squatting campaign was thus born as a concrete solution to an immediate problem as well as a symbolic attack on the housing crisis itself.

\textit{The Squatters}

The London Squatters’ Campaign’s first action was a publicity stunt on 1 December 1968. They discovered The Hollies, a large block of £15,000 per unit luxury flats left empty for four years. The LSC decided to stage a demonstration on the rooftop with banners and a press presence. Bailey had researched the law and discovered two important details. First, trespassing was a civil, but not a criminal, issue, so the police had no power to remove squatters. Second, the 1381 Forcible Entry Act protects a trespasser from violent removal by the owner or police until they obtain a court order of possession (CPO). Additionally, the activists were allowed on the property by disguising themselves as electricians so that security let them in. Since they did not damage anything, they had broken no laws and the police could not remove them.\textsuperscript{91} The property owner, Joseph Kasner, could have asked the police to remove the occupiers, but, after a short discussion, the police convinced him to

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{89} Bailey, 34.
\item \textsuperscript{90} Bailey, 31.
\item \textsuperscript{91} Bailey, 36-39.
\end{itemize}
leave them alone. After three hours, the activists left and occupied another empty building with the same press coverage and the same police inability to remove them. The Guardian, Financial Times, and other news outlets covered the story for the next few days, mostly with a sympathetic lens. Following this success, Bailey planned to squat the Church of England’s All Saints Old Vicarage in Leyton over Christmas 1968, which had been empty for three years. This time the LSC planned to stay in the building for twenty-four hours, which they did with less press coverage. The activists agreed that symbolic demonstrations had served their purpose; it was now time to move families out of hostels and into empty houses.

Bailey and his group of activists soon discovered Redbridge Council was the best place to squat homeless families. Redbridge left many good houses empty for up to ten years in anticipation of the ultimately never approved Ilford Redevelopment Scheme. After intensive planning, Bailey and company installed three families into two houses on Oakfield Road. The families had lived for years in council homeless hostels, making them the types of families who would never get on the housing list. Despite the law, the police quickly arrived and smashed in the squat. Days later, after re-squatting the property, all three families were back in place with strong barricades. As soon as the squats were established, the council began to implement preventive measures. They boarded up windows and doors of empty property, and took extreme measures by hiring workers to rip up floorboards, destroy stairs, smash toilets, break window frames, cut pipes, and rip out wiring. The negative publicity—spending £2,500 of ratepayers’ money to keep empty houses empty while people were homeless—benefitted the squatters immensely. Construction unions turned down wrecking work, so that the councils had to rely on non-union workers, exacerbating existing tensions

92 Bailey, 46-47.
93 Bailey, 49.
between the government and organized labor, which, in turn, created the implication of labor’s support for the squatters. Capitalizing on sympathetic press coverage, the squatters produced leaflets, held marches, and heckled councils while moving more families into the area. The squatters successfully argued in court that they did not forcibly enter or hold the premises. The council also tried to serve injunctions against the squatters to force them to vacate. Since injunctions had to name a specific occupier and a specific property, The squatters bypassed this legal problem by moving families in a kind of musical squats rotation or by providing a false name when served.94 These tactics ensured the squatters were able to stay long enough to gain support and make their cases against the council.

Redbridge council responded by hiring bailiffs to evict the squatters. On 21 April 1968 bailiffs from Barrie Quartermain’s firm, Redbridge workers, and police evicted squatters from some of the occupied houses. One family returned to council hostels while other families went back on the streets. A mass occupation by squatters at Town Hall pressured the council to provide temporary accommodation for these people, but some families plainly refused to go back to council’s “temporary accommodation.” They instead moved into the area around Britannia Road, Audrey Road, and Cleveland Road. Bailey also began a court proceeding against Quartermain and his men for their violent evictions, including a charge of riot.

The real battle began on 25 June 1969 at 5:30 am. Wearing steel helmets and goggles, carrying dustbin lids as shields, and equipping ropes, ladders, bricks, and crowbars, about two dozen men attacked one of the squats. Quartermain’s men had returned. Throwing bricks and bottles to drive the defenders away from the windows, they raised the ladders to make their entry. The squatters fought back, pushing the ladders from the windows, stealing

94 Bailey, 57.
then invaders’ helmets, crowbars, and shields and throwing paint, water, stones, and bricks. When the bailiffs became annoyed, they started the house on fire. The squatters kept the blaze under control until the fire brigade and police finally arrived to end the battle. Ten squatters successfully repelled Quartermain’s men.

The bailiffs attempted a second attack, this time on the squatters of 23 Audrey Road, but were again met with failure. Quartermain tried to save face by telling the assembled press that he would be back, but it was clear that his self-described “anti-squatter army” was being defeated in Illford.95 “Barrie’s tin-hat army” was widely reported as losing to the squatters in most major newspapers and Redbridge council itself received criticism for hiring Quartermain to evict squatters. The council also aggressively refused to talk to the press, which only increased the press sympathy for the squatters who always open with journalists. Radio programs, all the dailies, and BBC’s Today and Panorama gave sympathetic coverage to the squatters and criticized both Redbridge and Quartermain.

Regardless of the public sympathy and their victories against the incursions, the squatters maintained their twenty-four-hour guard and expected more bailiffs at any time. The Sunday Times and the Evening Standard each embedded journalists with the squatters who wrote accurate and sympathetic articles, including the Evening Standard’s “Inside the Squatters Castle.” Between 26 and 27 June, the Guardian, the Sun, Daily Sketch, and the Evening Standard all ran articles condemning Redbridge Council for their use of violent bailiffs against the squatters. Following the publication of these articles, Redbridge held a meeting to make an offer to the squatters to end the affair. During the meeting, some councilors made hostile 

95 Bailey, 91-93.
remarks, including “We should use tear gas on the swine.” These comments reached the press, further inflaming public opinion against Redbridge.  

The council gave the squatters until 4 July to vacate before bailiffs—although this time, not Quartermain’s—would evict them. The squatters refused this because they did not want to move families back out on to the streets and they did not trust the council’s pledge to “review policy” about empty houses. The squatters’ solution was to turn the two squats into fortresses. Defenses included pits and booby traps in the garden. Electric wiring was installed in the loft to prevent a smash in from the roof at Woodlands Road. Meanwhile, the front and back gardens of Audrey Road were filled with a tangled mess of barbed wire and a twenty-four-hour guard rotation was set in place at each house.

Bailey entered into negotiations with the council who offered terms including rehousing families who were from outside the borough if they agreed to stop squatting. Angered that Bailey negotiated on their behalf, the squatters rejected the offer out of fear they would end up in the same situation from which they had just escaped. The bailiffs did not come; however, unfortunately, one of the squatters suffered an epileptic attack, forcing the inhabitants to take down the barricades. The Times and the Guardian continued to pressure the council to review its housing policy while continuing to criticize its use of private bailiffs. Meanwhile, the central government issued a recommendation that councils should use empty houses.

Finally, the squatters and the council reached an agreement. First, the council had to explain why it chose to use or not use empty houses. It also had to agree to house people in houses that it had not scheduled for redevelopment for years. Second, the Ministry of

96 Bailey, 96.
97 Bailey, 94.
Housing would refuse to give loans to councils for home buying if they did not immediately put them into use. Finally, the council must use empty houses to reduce overcrowding and move people out of halfway houses. The council refused to repair the houses it wrecked in its squatter prevention campaign, but Bailey pushed on, and the councils finally agreed to give the wrecked houses over to housing associations—including voluntary organizations like Shelter—to repair and use. While this agreement was made in July 1970, the council did not actually hand them over until February 1971.98

The reason Redbridge had been leaving houses empty, wrecking them, and demolishing them was for a yet-to-be-scheduled redevelopment plan. In 1971, the Secretary of State for Environment rejected the plan. In the end, about four years of Redbridge policy had been completely in vain and wasted thousands of ratepayers’ pounds. The squatters’ claimed the initial move into Redbridge was justified because they put houses into use that the council was ultimately needlessly leaving empty and destroying. Bailey’s court case against Quartermain was successful, showing the council acted illegally in hiring bailiffs to evict. Squatters gained the houses not given to housing associations. The nearly three year Redbridge squatting campaign was a victory for the early squatter movement.

Bailey and his comrades decided on a course that Hans Pruijt later classified as “deprivation based squatting.” When people who met all the eligibility qualifications were unable to secure decent housing, middle-class activists would establish squats into which they could move.99 Their argument was that they were not engaged in “queue jumping” because the council already allocated houses for these people, but they were, for some reason, overlooked. The middle class activists appealed to a sense of social solidarity because

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98 Bailey, 111-113.
they were not squatting themselves but simply facilitating the housing for unquestionably deserving people. This appeal relied upon and proved successful through the widespread sympathy of similar squatters, such as those at Redbridge.

The activities of Bailey’s squatters were not explicitly structural challenges to the housing crisis but, instead, were protests against governmental inefficiency and inequitable housing allocations. Bailey represented one section of the squatting movement that wanted to use squatting as a means of either embarrassing the authorities into allocating houses, requisitioning empty private houses or putting into use empty council houses for short-life housing, licensed squats, or housing cooperatives.100 Almost immediately, other squatters regarded the “licensed squatters” as betraying their ideals, which in a sense was correct, and this remained a divide among squatters throughout the period. Councils sought to co-opt squatters to reassert control. They did this through their power of the purse relationship with Shelter and Student Community Housing in the same way they tried to control other squats.

The criticisms of unlicensed squatters against the licensing system were valid. The councils did not grant licenses to people who the council was not legally obligated to house, especially single people. The licensing scheme allowed the government to off-load its responsibility onto a charity. The licensing system did nothing to stem the flow of commodification of housing or to stop developers from building office blocks instead of decent and affordable housing. By working within the council housing system, the licensing process betrayed the concept of dweller control that sought to take housing out of the hands of governmental bureaucrats.101 Unlicensed squats continued to grow outside the licensing

100 Pruijt, 23.
101 The waiting list in London for 1971 approached 200,000 people, but the census figures for empty houses that year were 675,000. So unlicensed squatters might have won the ideological debate, but licensed squatters stood a better chance of sustainable and practical solutions.
system. There were 3,000 licensed squats in London in 1973, and hundreds outside London. However, the number of unlicensed squats was massive compared to those that were licensed. Different sources state there were 11,000 to 48,000 unlicensed squats in England between 1974 and 1976.\(^{102}\) The passage of the Criminal Law Act 1977 made licensing more desirable and prominent while facilitating the widespread practice of creating housing cooperatives.

Councils granted licenses to many squatters around London and beyond between 1968 and 1972 because they wanted to avoid the effort and money required to remove squatters either through the courts or by hiring bailiffs. The council, or private property owner, agreed to let the squatters stay in the property, provided they did not cause a nuisance to their neighbors and agreed to leave when the owner wanted the property. Sometimes, but not always, this involved paying rent; in this case, the squatters were licensees and not tenants, so they had no rights to tenants’ legal protections. Still, for about 2,000 people inside London, licensed squats meant a home, at least for a while.\(^{103}\)

Early on, squatters disagreed among themselves over the issue of licenses. Being a licensee meant no harassment from the legal owner of the house, but also meant no rights to stay when the owner wanted the house back. Licenses also did little to challenge the commodification of housing. Most often, the private or public landlord evicted the squatters or licensees to sell the house to an owner-occupier or to a development company that would demolish the house and build something more profitable such as luxury flats, offices, banks, or nightclubs.

\(^{102}\) Steve Platt, “A Decade of Squatting,” in Nick Wates (ed.), *Squatting: The Real Story*, 33; Franklin, 16.

\(^{103}\) Wates(ed.) *Squatting: The Real Story*, 231.
Contrary to most of the squatters’ literature, it was the councils and housing departments that were most active in setting up licenses and short-life houses that many squatters and potential squatters desired for both practical (housing homeless) and ideological (the injustice of leaving good houses empty) reasons. The types of squatters who professed DIY or self-help goals tended to even get Tory support to build cooperatives. Meanwhile, the more utopian radicals who did not want to work with the government under any circumstances, as well as those engaged in anti-social behavior, could not get support to open a cooperative house and were demonized by the press and government. The criticisms of the anti-license faction of squatters were valid as far as their overall confrontation with the housing authorities went. But it is also true that working outside the system was not sustainable long-term and also led to public and legal backlash against squatters by the mid-1970s.

The Redbridge campaign spurred many squatting groups to form and to begin installing families in empty houses around London. In some cases, such as Pat Smith in Battersea, the mere threat of squatting a house would push the council to rehouse a family because they did not want a repeat of the battles that Redbridge endured. Bailey and fellow activist Jim Radford sought to exploit the message that if homeless families squat the council will rehouse them. Councils were now more apt to go through the courts and not hire bailiffs. Some squatters vowed to fight off evictions, hoped to get sympathetic publicity and believed they would ultimately win; others chose to move on to another house. In some cases, a squatter would decide to fight a CPO, but then a housing association would step in to rehouse, avoiding the whole confrontation. Bailey critically reports about some extremists

104 Franklin, 39.
105 Bailey, The Squatters, 118.
106 Bailey, 119.
who wanted to hold onto squats at all costs, developing a “siege mentality”, but these were primarily young, unattached militants and not homeless families. Bailey clearly disagreed with the idea of living behind barricades and twenty-four-hour guards, represented by the London Street Commune of “Hippydilly,” as a positive development in housing activism.

Squatting as an Alternative Lifestyle

Squatting provided the alternative spaces many desired to explore new lifestyles, artistic pursuits, or minority identities. According to Pruijt, these often downwardly-mobile middle-class people wanted to be artists, activists, or somehow alternative to the mainstream, as was the case with communards and drug users. These squatters do not present themselves as deprived or as challenges to the system, but instead as wanting of personal autonomy. For instance, in the 1970s, Brixton had exclusively gay squats. Squats specifically for women (including the first battered wives refuge in Chiswick), or racial minorities (e.g., the Bengali squatters in Tower Hamlets) provided safe places for identity politics to take shape. Squatted spaces also became London’s first vegan cafes, free creches for working women, and radical bookshops. These kinds of squats generally made little demand on the housing authorities or government, and they typically focused on practical concerns related to their lifestyles rather than a consistent ideology about the state or market.

In 1972, a group of ex-mental hospital patients and hippies squatted in several houses on Elgin Avenue, near the affluent Maida Vale district of the City of Westminster, London. At the time Elgin Avenue was squatted, many family-oriented squatting organizations had formed and some worked closely with the local councils to house

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107 Bailey, 122-123.
homeless families who would otherwise end up in hostels or bed and breakfast accommodation. After the police and bailiffs violently evicted the Elgin Avenue squatters, the Greater London Council (GLC, the top tier of local government at this time) began issuing licenses to some squatters in the area. However, licenses were still withheld from many squatters in the area, typically because they were not families with small children or university students. The squatters who did not receive licenses, and their supporters, began a nearly three-year struggle to hold onto the houses they occupied in and around Maida Vale. During this struggle, squatters aligned with Student Community Housing, a group that arranged for university students to obtain licenses to squat, the Family Squatters Advisory Service (FSAS) that helped families to get into licensed squats, and the All London Squatters (ALS), a recently formed unlicensed squatting group. The eventual success of the Elgin Avenue squatters stemmed from their ability to use a variety of tactics while gaining and keeping public support for their most basic cause: access to housing.

The squatters without licenses continued to make demands on the GLC and Student Community Housing either to grant more licenses or to allow the unlicensed squatters to remain awaiting rehousing. The squatters, in essence, demanded the GLC do its job by providing accommodation for its homeless. While pleading this case to the authorities, the squatters also appealed to the wider community by giving press conferences highlighting their living conditions, creating a community newspaper, and making alliances with trade unionists and left-wing political organizations such as the International Marxist Group. They also continued to break into and occupy more buildings. The police quickly moved in and arrested squatters on 24 September 1973 when they occupied an empty Maida Vale hotel.

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The Chief Inspector laid out the class-based dimensions of the squatting issue: “Squatting is one thing; you have to live somewhere. But squatting in Maida Vale is another. Stick to your own patch.” Clearly, he could not accept the presence of squatters in the upscale neighborhood. Squatters also occupied several properties owned by the Church Commission, the property-managing body of the Church of England. Occupying private property gained the support of tenants’ and residents’ associations who had disagreed with squatting in public housing and had labelled squatters as “queue jumpers.” In addition, the squatters built barricades to keep out the bailiffs.

A vibrant community formed on Elgin Avenue during the constant struggle against the authorities. The squatters were not a monolithic entity, but, despite arguments about overall goals, the coalition held. They divided over licenses. They also divided between anarchist/libertarian elements who wanted free housing for all as part of a more utopian concept of full communism, and the Marxist elements who opposed evictions but did not necessarily want to live rent-free. Still, the Elgin Avenue squatters managed to stick together.

With help from ALS, they opened up a community center, charged a “voluntary contribution” for all squatters of 10p a week to keep their newspaper going, and organized a community defense force that protected squatters from police and thieves. By 1975, employed squatters and those living on benefits put their combined resources into creating a nearly self-sufficient community. DIY and mutual aid emerged as squatters shared skills and tools to repair houses, paint homes, and build community spaces such as gardens and play places. They also began a pirate radio station (Radio Concorde). Joe Strummer of the 101ers and later The Clash got his start living, practicing, and performing on Elgin Avenue. The

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111 Corbyn, 133.
112 Corbyn, 132-3.
113 Corbyn, 133.
squatters funded these activities both through their own earnings as well as through welfare benefits. It is difficult to make broad generalizations about squatters because as many self-described anti-capitalist revolutionaries as there were in the movement, there were plenty of rather ordinary people with jobs and children who simply needed a place to live.

Piers Corbyn of the International Marxist Group ran as the “squatters’ and tenants’ candidate” in the Westminster council election in an attempt to unite the fight against the housing crisis inside and outside the government. He just barely lost, so the GLC elections of May 1974 brought in a firmly anti-squatting council. In Elgin Avenue, the squatters demanded a say in GLC plans for redevelopment of the area and that the GLC should rehouse all the squatters in acceptable and permanent houses. In January 1975, the GLC announced its “firm but humane” policy against squatters while arguing the current group of squatters were entirely different from the old ones. According to the GLC, the current batch were vandals, drop-outs, and hippies bent on living rent-free at the expense of other citizens and impeding progress on housing redevelopment and not deserving people desperately trying to house themselves.114 As was the case with older waves of squatters, the new ones could often be both deserving and undeserving. Nevertheless, the “Harper Letter” from the 11 July 1975 Times marked a turning point in the public debate. This letter by Elizabeth Harper claimed that squatters broke into the locked house that she owned while she was on holiday, and the police refused to help her. The Metropolitan Police issued a statement that not only did Miss Harper never contact them, but also Miss Harper was in fact Miss Such who never lived anywhere near the house in question.115 Nonetheless, this fraudulent letter

114 Corbyn, 135.
initiated the accepted public discourse that squatters would move into people’s houses while they were on holiday, at work, or at the shops.

The squatters countered with their own press conference, including pictures of good houses wrecked by the council to prevent new squatters. While squatting began to receive increasingly negative attention from the press, in Elgin Avenue’s case, all the press scrutiny revealed rather ordinary people painting and repairing houses that the GLC neglected or vandalized. The Elgin Avenue episode took place at the cusp of the public image of squatters transitioning from a minor hippie menace to full-blown folk devil, and they succeeded in their struggle in part due to this. Through all their efforts, they were winning the public debate that the council should do more to house people, including squatters. The GLC took its eviction case to the High Court on 8 October 1975, and hundreds of squatters picketed the courthouse. Although the judge granted the eviction, he also ordered that the GLC must rehouse the squatters. Over the next week, nearly 200 squatters, trade unionists, journalists, and others stood together to defend the barricades. A week later, the barricades came down and the council gave the squatters of Elgin Avenue permanent rehousing. After nearly three years of direct action, appeals to public sympathy, and working with the council, voluntary organizations, trade unions and the courts, the squatters of Elgin Avenue won a widely regarded significant battle in the struggle for decent housing.

Resisting eviction was the “event” that prompted many councils to try to work with squatters through the process of licensing. Redbridge and Elgin Avenue proved that resisting an eviction could ultimately result in squatters gaining suitable and secure housing. Councils often would prefer to work with squatters rather than try to evict them. In addition, by granting a license, the councils recognized the fait accompli of the squatters’ presence and allowed them to stay in a house as long as the council did not need it. This could be several
years, depending on the development plans of the council. The council or the Family Squatting Advisory Services would make every effort to rehouse the squatters, but they made no promises. The licenses brought into sharper focus the public discourse dividing “deserving” family squatters from “queue jumping hippies” even more so than the Hippydilly episode. The division of public opinion was also present within the squatting movement itself.

The Bride Street Commune demonstrated the ability of unlicensed direct action to meet the housing needs of people, despite council opposition and meddling by “official” squatters. Islington bought Bride Street in 1971, but left it empty until 1972. Three families moved into various short-life houses as squatters around Bride Street. At first, the council gave them verbal assurances that they could stay. The Bride Street Commune, as they called themselves, informed the authorities of their intention to stay, asked for short-lets, and offered to pay rent. The council refused and began eviction proceedings. The squatters, joined by the Tottenham Claimants’ Union, marched on the housing department where the police ejected them. On 17 June, the squatters formed the Islington Squatters’ Group that picketed and petitioned the Labour Group at Town Hall. The police were called in again. The council issued a press statement denouncing the squatters as an undeserving commune, and the squatters issued a counter statement and began a hunger strike with a daily picket outside the Town Hall. On 27 June, barricades went up and squatters declared a “no-go area” as the whole street came out to support the squatters.

Meanwhile, nearby houses were being destroyed while the people still lived in them. The police and press showed up while the squatters pled their case in court, but the judge rejected the earlier verbal assurances and issued a possession order. Social workers joined the numbers of supporters—a rarity at this time—while over 100 police from three stations
arrived and dismantled the barricades. At the end of June, the squatters received widespread support, press coverage, and held a festival. The hunger strike continued, and squatters presented petitions to the council with hundreds of signatures. Police were present to keep order, but generally refrained from harassing the squatters. Jim Radford of FSAS negotiated with the council behind Islington Squatters’ backs, to their displeasure, but by 7 July, the council announced it would not evict Bride Street and would make rehousing arrangements. The press reported that the “squatters won” but the squatters still believed they were under threat. The Council offered licenses for houses to Student Community Housing and promised to rehouse the three original squatters. In August 1972, the squatters remained and the council took no firm actions to either evict or rehouse.\(^{116}\)

_Squatting Successes_

In addition to the victories of Redbridge and Elgin Avenue, the squatting movement achieved many more wide-ranging successes. Over the course of the mid-1970s, 30,000-50,000 people squatted per year. Between 1968 and 1980, over a quarter of a million Britons had squatted. These numbers are people who the government would have otherwise left homeless. Squatting associations were also successful organizational methods for bringing homeless people together to effectively pressure the government for their benefit. Under pressure, councils had to recognize squats with licenses or granting of co-op status. By 1969, many councils engaged with squatting organizations to help them house their homeless population under the provisions of Section 21(2) of the 1948 Act. Squatting campaigns kept the reality of homeless people and empty houses in the public eye. Organizations like Shelter and Family Squatters Advisory Service were the key pressure groups that prompted the

passage of the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977. Squatters also pressured councils to use their power of requisition to bring empty property into use.

Another way squatters succeeded was in what Hans Pruijt describes as “conservational squatting”: squatting in specific land or cityscapes as a preservation tacit.117 Squatters in Tower Hamlets, Tolmers Square, Pullens Estate, and Villa Road and places outside London such as Kenilworth on occasion stopped demolitions and instead forced planners to rehabilitate and revitalize areas of working-class community heritage. In Brixton, the Lambeth council was buying some private property, and the presence of squatters once again created a conflict between people trying to find a place to live and developers and speculators trying to make a profit. “The Brixton Plan” was to knock down Victorian- and Edwardian-era working-class houses around Villa Road and replace them with low- and high-rise tower blocks, build a six-lane motorway, and construct new rail and underground lines. Then the council would move in middle-class residents.118 Compulsory purchase orders started in 1967, and the area began to decay as people expected demolition and then rehousing. The housing list was 14,000 and most people in Lambeth did not qualify. The building plans never materialized. Some tenants staged rent strikes, some were rehoused and their properties boarded up or given to licensed squatter groups. Number 20 St. John’s Crescent became the center of “conservational” squatting in the area. Other squats opened on Villa Road. The 1974 GLC elections brought in new anti-squatter councilors and the All Lambeth Squatters emerged in response, organizing 600 people to demonstrate at Town Hall to address the housing crisis. The council shelved the “Brixton Plan,” leaving many in the area uncertain about their housing future.

The hardline council met militant squatters over 1974-76. The council continued to demolish good homes for a proposed but never-to-be-approved park. They gutted other houses to prevent squatting. The Trade Council Inquiry recommended that no more evictions or demolitions take place, that for standing houses be rehabilitated, and that local people should take part in housing decisions. The council ignored these recommendations. The Trades Council blacked wrecking work, and the confrontation at St. Agnes was widely publicized. The council hired non-union wrecking crews at £13,600 of taxpayers’ money to start destroying the squats, succeeding with sixteen occupied houses before a court injunction stopped them.\footnote{119} The squatters erected barricades and gained support from the labor movement; meanwhile, the council failed to secure all of its CPOs. The council appealed to the High Court against the squatters; the squatters mounted a legal defence, backed by two Lambeth councilors. A Labour-led council proceeded to act against the squatters, but the failure of St. Agnes and a Department of Environment inspector’s report opposing the demolition of Villa Road bolstered the squatters’ cause. For now, the squatters had won. In 1978, a new left-Labour council led by Ted Knight were more sympathetic to the squatters.\footnote{120} Villa Road Street Group considered becoming a co-op, like many squats at this time. In big squats, negotiations, rather than evictions, became the norm. By 1980, Villa Road was a secure co-op, housing about 1,000 people in 20 Victorian-era houses that squatters saved from demolition.

Myrdle Street, just east of The City, had houses owned by Eparcent. It was squatted in March 1972. They offered to pay rent, but Eparcent refused and started County Court possession proceedings. The squatters lost the case but won public opinion. They marched

\footnote{119} “A Whole New Ball Game,” in Nick Wates (ed.), 82-3.
to Town Hall and demanded the council take over the houses from Eparcent. Support came from most of the libertarian left, the Communist Party, claimants’ unions, and gay liberationists. This area had previously been the scene of CP-led rent strikes in the 1930s, and many locals sympathized with the squatters who stood up to the widely despised landlords. BBC2 filmed inside the Myrdle Street squat, and won the News Film of the Year (1972) award. The squat was still evicted, though the squatters moved on to Parfett Street. Myrdle was barricaded to resist eviction in part because resisting meant publicity for the housing crisis and potentially saving the squat. Eventually, several sledgehammer-armed, hired thugs—backed up by police—smashed through the barricades and removed the squatters, who then moved completely to Parfett Street.

About a fortnight later, the real eviction came, with police cordonning off both ends of the street and workers coming in to remove property. Eparcent put Alsatian dogs in the evicted houses, sparking “People used to live in this house, now it’s gone to the dogs” graffiti. Then, a squatter who used to work for Securicor turned up and offered to remove the dogs. He succeeded and two houses were re-squatted. The next day, with all the dogs removed, all the houses were re-squatted. Eparcent gave up and the houses remained squatted as of 1980.122

In boroughs with enough squatting groups, federations formed. In West London, the Ruff Tuff Cream Puff Estate Agency formed in 1974 to advertise squattable property in the area. Other squatters’ groups did the same. Islington squatters produced the first Squatters Handbook in 1973. All London Squatters formed as an umbrella unlicensed squatting organization. They opposed the licensing scheme because it failed to advocate for the rights

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122 Pettitt, 129.
of all squatters, as well as their use of Shelter and council funds with their attached restrictions. This split widened over the question of whether to hand back council property.123 A militancy among those who refused to quit properties further divided squatters into two camps that opposed each other and received different treatment by politicians and the media. This further delegitimized squatters in the public mind. The Advisory Service for Squatters formed out of the pro-unlicensed squatters’ faction within the Family Squatters Advisory Service. Shelter withdrew its funding, and this forced the Advisory Service for Squatters to become an entirely volunteer organization collectively run by its members and not an authoritative body. It still exists to this day, perhaps the strongest testament to the power of non-hierarchical, volunteer organizations working outside the system.

Backlash against Squatters

English law has never considered squatting itself to be a criminal act. However, the period 1969-1977 hardened the courts’ and politicians’ attitude towards squatting. Squatters could be trespassers, but that was a civil matter between squatter and owner. Attempts were made in the 1970s to make squatting itself criminal trespass and the 1977 Criminal Law Act attempted to do this. Even the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act of 1977 in effect marginalized those squatters who were not recognized with licenses or cooperative houses. The law, of course, protected capitalist claims to private property i.e., an owner will always succeed in his claims to rights over his property while a squatter will not. Squatters gained much sympathy as they were housing themselves and others during a housing crisis, while the owners were just leaving property empty because they could, yet the law was always on

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123 “Fighting Back,” in Nick Wates (ed.), 69-70
the owners’ side. Sometimes the owners made mistakes, allowing a squatter victory.¹²⁴ Most squatters did not know the law and, therefore, were not successful against evictions. Successful groups had help from community law centers, Advisory Service for Squatters, or other groups who knew the legal recourse.

In 1968-69, the 1381 Forcible Entry Act protected squatters from eviction without court order. In 1970, the laws began to change, making it easier for landlords to get possession orders, including against “persons unknown” whereas previously a squatter could delay eviction by giving a false name. In 1970, speedy evictions came into law under Order 113 in High Court and Order 26 in County Court.¹²⁵ Most property owners obtained possession orders, and many landlords, police, and bailiffs illegally evicted squatters throughout this period. Press and squatter pressure, sometimes with politician support, meant that even in cases of possession orders being granted, the judge in the case would ensure the squatters got rehoused, such as in Elgin Avenue. In 1972, the Law Commission began working on laws more hostile to squatters, including making all unauthorized occupations criminal trespass—these efforts became The Criminal Law Act of 1977. Meanwhile, courts rejected that squatters assertion that they were in the right because local authorities failed to provide homeless accommodation under the 1948 Act. Evictions while squatters were at court became legal and the requirement of possession orders was relaxed (McPhail v. Persons Unknown 1973). Loopholes exploited by squatters gradually closed over the mid-1970s. Possession proceedings were sped up and landlords no longer had to find out the names of squatters or give them time to find new housing or mount a defense.¹²⁶ The


Cracking houses and squatting was still legal, but it was now harder because it became a crime when squatters refused to leave or resisted the efforts of those trying to evict them. “Protected Intended Occupier” (PIO) was a new category created under the Act. This meant a landlord could claim a squatted house was about to be rented to someone else in order to evict the squatters. He was not under any obligation to produce the potential tenant or to use the house when the squatters left. The Criminal Law Act most frequently affected worker and student occupations, but it gained public approval by being presented as a measure against the "squatter folk devil." In addition, licensees and short-life tenants could now be prosecuted under anti-squatter laws if they failed to vacate when asked to, although they never thought of themselves as squatters. Squatters were able to gain access to services (gas, electric, water) due to laws that said any occupier of a premise was entitled if requested. Many squatters did just this and agreed to pay. Often, the councils would pressure the providers to cut off services as a way to evict squatters, but it was not until 1975, in an atmosphere of criminalizing squatters as trespassers, that providers routinely denied services to squatters.

By 1976, a sustained attack on squatting was in full swing. Large evictions became so commonplace that they did not even make headlines. Most squatters left without resistance and the average life for an inner London squat was 3-4 months. Others built sustained campaigns against evictions and got some councils, like Camden, to allow squatters to stay in short-life property unmolested. Camden still gutted houses and refused to rehouse evicted

127 Electricity Clauses Act 1899, Gas Act 1948 and Water Act 1945 all state occupiers of a dwelling are entitled to services, but in many cases squatters would need to pay a large deposit or face higher monthly rates.
128 Watkinson, “The Erosion of Squatters’ Rights,” 162
squatters, but it did admit that short-life houses were better in squatters’ hands than left empty. In 1975, in part because of the GLC’s “humane but firm” policy and the creation of a “squatter folk devil” in the media, public antipathy for squatters grew. This occurred despite the fact that, by the end of 1975, unlicensed squatting became just another way to find short-term housing. Officials even admitted in private that they had to tolerate squatting because they could not envision an alternative to the 30-50,000 people squatting. All kinds of organizations, as well as the police, referred homeless people to squatters’ groups for help. Officials accepted squatting, but tried to keep it under their control. Opposition against squatters was largely successful due to lack of squatters’ organization, notwithstanding the myth of highly organized militants. Many squatters got by and got on by downplaying their status as squatters. Others tried to engage with the media to no avail. Still, others began to organize at a street or block level. Tower Hamlets had fourteen groups alone and many others set up around London. The Elgin victory was exceptional and did not spread to others. Evictions were common and organized resistance was lacking. Most squatters were not political radicals and were content to move on when evicted. Anti-social squatters and drug dealers began to move in, creating additional problems for the more “together” squatters who already had to deal with outside hostility.

Unsurprisingly, participants and observers understood squatting as a political act. Nick Wates and Hans Pruijt describe squatting as “generically” political and many squatters would consider themselves as political activists or revolutionaries—to various degrees of credibility. Squats provided alternative spaces for political ideas and practices to take shape, most often ideologies of the political far-left, but English squatters tended to be political in a more generic way as opposed to the German K-Gruppen or Dutch Woorgroep Staatsliedenbuurt.

which organized themselves with explicit political goals and motivations, most often providing low-income housing. More often, English squatters were political at the level of interacting with local councilors and politicians. The Conservatives nearly unanimously condemned the squatters and tried to pass legislation to criminalize them. The Labour Party divided between left-wing local government and right-wing national government. The GLC of “Red” Ted Knight was sympathetic to squatters and passed a general amnesty. The national Labour Party criticized the local parties for encouraging community-based direct action campaigns, seeing it as divisive to the national party. The Criminal Law Act 1977, which tried to criminalize squatting and trespassing, began as a bill under the Conservative Edward Heath, but passed under the Labour administration of James Callaghan. The Advisory Service for Squatters launched a Campaign against the Criminal Trespass Law, which was, perhaps, the most explicitly political activity opposing national legislation by squatters. The licensed squatters relied on cordial relations with local councils, so they were more likely to get involved in grassroots party activities for Labour. Liberals agreed with the squatters’ moral argument that empty houses should be used to house homeless people, and squatters seemed to support Liberal ideology for this reason.

In general, most squatters were sympathetic to revolutionary libertarian politics such as Trotskyism or anarchism. Many squatters would have been involved at some level with the Communist or Socialist Parties, but the hierarchy of most established far-left parties condemned squatting. The anarchist newspaper Freedom gave mostly sympathetic coverage to the squatters of 1968-9, and the more extreme anarchists of Class War actively encouraged squatting in the 1980s as part of a campaign against gentrification. Squatting and squatters

131 Franklin, 8.
were generally political but never incorporated as a key part of any political party or movement.

*Squatting in the 1980s*

The widespread support and positive legal standing many squatters had enjoyed over the 1970s was significantly eroded by the 1980s. The Criminal Law Act 1977 greatly reduced their room for maneuver. The councils and central government continued to sell off council housing and push for owner-occupation, especially with the Housing Act 1980. Moreover, the general attitude among squatters was to try to form cooperative houses because they were more secure and less likely to attract negative attention from the authorities. Together, these conditions weakened the appeal of squatting as a mass movement, and, consequently, a much more diffuse movement continued without the full-scale battles against bailiffs or massive pickets of town halls and courthouses. The squatting movement was by no means over, and the 1980s witnessed some significant continuities from the heady days of the previous decade.

The situation of squatting in the 1980s depended largely on where one squatted. In Camden, well-organized squatters held weekly meetings and produced a newssheet fully funded by squatted community spaces such as Molly’s Café, a vegan pay-what-you-can co-op café; CopyArt, a radical publishing workshop; and Truffles, a squatted venue that held shows as well as the Camden Squatters’ meetings.133 Camden squatters successfully installed students in unused student housing on Gower Street near the University of London. They also occupied Camden Town Hall demanding better accommodation for inmates of a local bed and breakfast in which a Bengali mother and her two children died in an arson fire. According to the Camden squatters, the London Electricity Board had no problem

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providing services to squatters, as long as they paid a large deposit. The gas and electric laws that squatters had benefitted from were overturned during the 1970s to put pressure on squatters, but, if pressed, the services would be turned on for squatters.\textsuperscript{134} The infamous 121 Center in Brixton opened in 1981 and was the scene of many radical ventures. The 121 Center was one of the few long-term “entrepreneurial squats.”\textsuperscript{135} *Big Flame for Socialism* one of the few explicitly feminist leftist newspapers in London housed its press there at many points in its history. It hosted Brixton Squatters’ Network, Food Not Bombs, and London’s Anarchist Black Cross. The 121 Center successfully resisted eviction attempts until the final showdown in 1999.

In Southwark, the situation was different. In November 1984, Southwark council began enforcing Section 7 of the Criminal Law Act 1977 to evict squatters using the PIO process. The Advisory Service for Squatters worked daily to help people evicted in this way, and found that throughout the early-1980s, councils abused the PIOS, with Southwark not moving in tenants after squatter evictions.\textsuperscript{136} ASS helped squatters in court through the “McKenzie” process, but, otherwise, most squatters lacked representation and lost their homes.\textsuperscript{137} Also during this time, the power of a CPO extended, *de facto*, to cover a property, giving it the power to evict immediately any new squatters who re-squatted a flat, even if they had no connection to the earlier squatters. ASS admitted they spent most of their time providing legal aid, but they were underfunded, understaffed, and undertrained to deal with the often-complex legal matters.

\textsuperscript{135} Hans Pruijt, “Squatting in Europe,” 32.
\textsuperscript{136} ASS: Advisory Service for Squatters (September 1985-February 1986): 2-3.
\textsuperscript{137} A “McKenzie friend” is someone who assists a litigant in a civil court proceeding. This person can be a friend or other concerned person with or without legal knowledge who takes notes, gives advice, and provides moral support. Many squatters and claimants in appeals tribunals benefitted from the help of McKenzie friends in England and Wales.
Yet for others in the same borough, when legal actions failed, direct action succeeded. The Pullens Estate in Southwark resisted evictions through barricades, weekly meetings, and solidarity among squatters. Pruijt would classify the Pullens Estate tenants and squatters as “conservational squatters” because they sought to keep a Victorian-era working-class district intact and not turned into office space or luxury flats. After an attempted CPO, the Pullens’ squatters, led by Piers Corbyn, picketed the High Court until they obtained a twenty-one day stay of eviction. After that time elapsed, the squatters continued to defend the barricades, which lasted until 1986. The Pullens estate benefitted enormously from squatters because their occupation of building prevented the council from demolishing and redeveloping, thus keeping the nearly hundred-year-old working class district intact. Pullens estate tenant associations repaid the favor by advocating for secure tenancies for squatters.

Remarkably, despite the several laws enacted over the 1970s to make squatting more difficult and to criminalize the act, by the mid-1980s, squatting was still an active movement. Evidence from the Squatters’ Network of Walworth (SNOW) shows that the law under Orders 26 and 113 were not uniformly enforced. SNOW offered advice to its readers of The Wire to quickly re-squat evicted properties because most often they could stay. This strongly suggests that laws passed in 1970 to make evictions and re-evictions easier did not have full enforcement by the early 1980s. The 1977 Criminal Law Act was supposed to make it easier to issue an injunction against properties that would apply to anyone squatting there and lessened the obligation for a landlord to find out the names of persons he wished to evict. Yet, SNOW advised its readers to withhold their names as a way to delay eviction,

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138 Hans Pruijt, 37.
apparently with success. Furthermore, the tactic of ignoring eviction orders and staying put still seemed to be standard practice into the mid-1980s, just as it was back in 1968 when Ron Bailey and company first squatted in Redbridge. All this points to a successful strategy of the squatters to resist eviction, use the courts, and gain public support to make evictions a huge waste of money, resources, and public image for councils and landlords. It was not until 1992 that trespass became a criminal offense, and, in 2012, squatting in residential property became illegal. Squatting in non-residential property is still a civil matter between squatters and owners, and groups such as ASS continue to provide advice and support for English squatters.

Conclusion

The squatters of 1968-1985 were not a well-organized working-class movement but a loose affiliation of direct contacts and emulation. These diffuse actions together represented an important alternative to the status quo of post-industrial-cum-neoliberal capitalism. Pruijt argues squatters were able to free themselves from a dependent attitude toward the market and state by taking care of their housing needs in a way that broke norms of private property rights and challenged the implied social acceptance of homeless people surrounded by empty houses. In the squatters, we can see tangible attempts to solve an individual and national housing crisis that questioned the legitimacy of capitalism and exposed the inability of the welfare state to provide adequate housing. Squatting was above all an attempt to secure housing, often in line with ideals that were incompatible with reality. Housing shortages, complicated allocation processes, and competing claims for increasingly scarce public revenue along with bureaucratic inefficiency, indifference, and hostility all contributed to people being left homeless or badly housed while many good houses were left empty. But to

make sense of the motivations and self-justifications of the squatters, it is helpful to consider
E.P. Thomson’s concept of “legitimization” in the moral economy of the English crowd.
Most often, the squatters were of the generation who grew up steeped in the laws and
rhetoric of “cradle to the grave” welfare state intervention, especially for housing, and so
expected affordable and adequate housing to be available to them. Like the eighteenth
century crowd, the squatters considered the linking of a need like housing to the profit nexus
of the market with the concomitant raising rents, investment properties (left empty until a
higher price may be fetched), and fracturing of long-standing communities to be illegitimate
practices. Especially in the case of empty houses, it would have seemed quite justified to
move in a badly housed or homeless family. Squatting was a manifestation of a wider
disillusionment with welfare state capitalism as Keynesianism declined and previously
regarded entitlements became increasingly difficult to maintain, often due to market-force
discipline. The next chapter will analyze the National Federation of Claimants’ Unions as
another example of how Britons made the welfare state work for them when it failed on its
own.
Chapter II
The Fight to Live: The Claimants’ Unions
“Do they owe us a living? Of course they do!”
Crass, 1977

The same late-1960s atmosphere that catalyzed the development of the squatters’ movement in England also produced another movement of grass roots working-class direct action. The claimants’ unions—open to all current and former claimants of state benefits—formed in response to a welfare state system, which had become in the eyes of many people too unwieldy, too impersonal, and too inaccessible to alleviate the poverty of many working-class Britons. The claimants’ unions demanded “user control” over the welfare state, which they argued would only be possible if those who claimed organized together to collectively bargain with the government for improved and increased benefits. Their approach was two-fold: first, they demanded from the welfare state all benefits to which people were entitled at a level that could cover the minimum cost of living; second, they sought to overthrow capitalism and the welfare state as it existed to create a communist society in which all people would have the right to a guaranteed minimum income. The claimants’ unions’ practical, if unlikely, demands were for the welfare state provide for those who were entitled to provision and that those entitlements were adequate to meet the financial demands of modern life. Their reasonable demands partially counter-balanced their highly idealistic goals. The claimants’ unions were radical and revolutionary in their ideals and practices, but they were part of a much larger criticism and disillusionment with the welfare state from far less controversial sources. They demonstrated the ability of movements outside trade unions and parliamentary parties to shape what the working class was and what it could achieve.

Four students who had previously claimed welfare benefits formed the first claimants’ union at the University of Birmingham in the autumn of 1968. In much the same vein as squatters, tenants’ associations, and direct action protests against nuclear weapons, the claimants’ unions believed that
direct-participatory action was the best solution to the wider-scale issues that affected their lives.

Demand for “user control” of the welfare state had grown since the Ministry of Social Security Act (1966) changed National Assistance to Supplementary Benefits and began publishing a guidebook for what and how to claim. This prompted the development of the “poverty lobby” including national organizations like the Child Poverty Action Group, the most well-known among several others. A problem developed right away because the handbook cost too much for those reliant on benefits to afford, and most social security offices did not make free information available.

Moreover, Code A and Code AX guided social security clerks in how to approve or deny claims, and these were kept secret under the Official Secrets Act. This meant that many people entitled to benefits were ignorant of their rights, and much abuse at social security offices took place as a result.

Therefore, the Birmingham Claimants’ Union initially began compiling what information was available and distributing it at social security offices and at regular meetings open to all those who could claim benefits.

From the start in Birmingham, many other claimants’ unions began to form around England and Wales, eventually forming a National Federation in 1970. The unions organized themselves in small and highly flexible groups, which was one key to their success. They argued—implicitly in line with much anarchist thinking—that small, directly democratic groups were the most effective organizational method for working toward revolutionary change. They would often cite bureaucratic top-heaviness and inflexibility in trade unions, the Labour Party, and indeed the welfare state itself as evidence. They based their rather idealistic goals upon their rational observation of the economic system. They argued that scientific and economic progress should create greater equality in society with rising living standards and shorter average working weeks for all. They state, without

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going into too much discussion, as a given that technology should be used for necessary work and to satisfy human needs while cutting the amount of time each person needs to work to survive. Instead, what they found was most technology was simply unneeded, used for “stupid” and “irrational” purposes such as weapons, space exploration, advertising, and “spying” (possibly meaning tracking purchases), and that hundreds of occupations were unnecessary. Their language suggests they were speaking to people who might generally agree and therefore did not present much in the way of hard evidence or economic theory.

The idea that more technological progress should reduce the burden of work was a staple of Marxist and anarchist thinking since the nineteenth century, and the claimants’ unions should be thought of as a part of the revolutionary left. To answer the criticism that there will be “scroungers” or that necessary work will not be carried out, the claimants’ union turned to a classic anarchist response: the murder law myth. This thought experiment states that if the law against murder were repealed there would not suddenly be a massive increase in murder simply because there was no law against it. In a similar way, the claimants’ union argued that if work was useful, satisfying, and necessary, then people would do it and contribute their share. In addition, by ensuring true and direct democracy, those who shirked work or tried to take over would be overwhelmed by the pressure of their peers to change their behavior or be excluded from society.

The claimants’ unions were theoretically similar to anarcho-syndicalists. They sought to abolish the wage system and implement direct worker control of the economy, and claimant control of the welfare system. In their own words, “it is impossible to understand where the claimants’ union movement is going or what it is doing apart from the labour and socialist movement.”

Without a socialist revolution and the creation of communism, the claimants’ unions’ ideals and

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3 “A Few Political Thoughts,” 20.
4 “A Few Political Thoughts,” 20.
5 Claimants Unite no.9 pp. 4-5.
goals do not make sense. Their long-term strategy was to collapse the welfare state system by swamping it with demands and then to rebuild it under worker/claimant control. They argued workers and claimants needed to eliminate the divisions between them in order to create a revolutionary society. In their literature, we can see a long tradition of socialist thought. For example, the first two issues of the Journal of the National Federation of Claimants Unions examined Friedrich Engels’ “The Condition of the Working Class in England” and the Chartists as early socialist responses to capitalist exploitation and then argues that the situation in 1970 was not any better. The claimants’ unions then extend the socialist critique of capitalism to a critique of the welfare state. The welfare state was seen to fill the gaps created by capitalism (unemployment, slump, “unproductive” skills and people), but it did not challenge the existence of those gaps. At their core, the claimants’ unions envisioned a society that abolished the capitalist system as a whole instead of just filling in the gaps.

The claimants’ unions demanded direct control over the welfare system and by extension the economic system itself. In this demand, they aligned with many voices on the radical left, some of whom openly supported the claimants. The long-standing anarchist newspaper Freedom argued in 1968, “Revolution will be brought a step nearer if the unemployed and the workers are united in opposition to the prevailing Government and the inhuman system of which it is a part” in language mirroring much of claimants’ unions’ literature. Libertarians (anarchists and revolutionary socialists) and the claimants’ unions demanded a guaranteed minimum income and the right not to work if work meant dirty, degrading, and unnecessary work. A year later, Freedom argued that unemployment was a sensible way of life if the only options were to labor for someone else’s profit. Instead work should be useful and satisfying, including work that was socially responsible.

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6 Journal of the National Federation of Claimants Unions no.1 pg. 35; no. 2 pg. 3.
expressed similar ideals to the claimants’ unions (in part, because members wrote for the paper). Rank and file organizations must be democratically and directly controlled by those involved and must oppose bureaucratic trade unions as a way to control their own lives and create conditions to bring a libertarian communist revolution. Additionally, the Anarchist Workers’ Association vowed to support claimants’ unions as the genuine voice of the unemployed. They state all people deserve “a decent standard of living” job or no job, seemingly directly quoting from the claimants’ unions’ literature. Finally, the socialist paper *Big Flame: Merseyside Socialist Newspaper* came out in support of the claimants’ unions’ attempt to link up with Liverpool dock-workers and builders in 1972, while also echoing their call for a guaranteed minimum income, taking everything one can get from social security, and that there is enough wealth in the United Kingdom to support it. Beginning with a discussion of post-war welfare states, the claimants’ unions will be analyzed as one of the most radical popular responses to its deficiencies in the United Kingdom.

*The European Welfare States*

Shortly after World War II, European states generally agreed that certain aspects of society could not be left subject to market forces. Between 1950 and 1973 public spending rose an average of 12 percent across much of Western Europe with the Scandinavian countries of Denmark and Sweden devoting nearly 250 percent more to social security than before the war. State spending and the belief that the state was the best coordinator, provider, caretaker, and guardian of its citizens’ economic and social rights was widespread through most of Europe and across most political divides. A seeming consensus that insurance, pensions, health, education, and housing

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10 *Liberation Struggle* 1 March 1976, 7.
should not be subjected to the vagaries of unrestricted market forces spread across most of Western Europe.\textsuperscript{13}

The post-war British welfare state was a complicated amalgamation of Elizabethan Poor Laws, Victorian provisions for the poor, pre-First World War and interwar insurance and pension schemes, and Second World War wartime planning of the economy. William Beveridge’s 1942 \textit{Social Insurance and Allied Services} became popularly known as the Beveridge Report and was synonymous with the welfare state. The foundational Acts of Parliament establishing the welfare state were: The Unemployment Act 1934, The Butler Act 1944, The Family Allowance Act 1945, The National Insurance Act 1946, The National Assistance Act 1948, and the National Health Act 1948.\textsuperscript{14}

Together, these Acts were meant to fulfil the Beveridge Report’s promise of “cradle to the grave” security against the “giant evils” of society: squalor, ignorance, want, idleness, and disease. As the first chapter has shown, the welfare state provision of housing was found by many to be lacking, especially by the late-1960s – early-1970s. At this time, some began to criticize other aspects of the welfare state.

British sociologist T.H. Marshall argued: “There is little difference of opinion as to the services that must be provided, and it is generally agreed that, whoever provides them, the overall responsibility for the welfare of the citizens must remain with the state.”\textsuperscript{15} The removal of certain responsibilities from private individuals and groups (e.g., unemployment insurance, health, housing, and education) by the state became what was known as a “citizenship of entitlement.”\textsuperscript{16} In the

\textsuperscript{13} Judt looks specifically at the United Kingdom, France, West Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Italy.
historiography of citizenship, economic and social welfare are categorized as the last and most inclusive of rights, following from rights of free speech, thoughts, and faith (eighteenth century), and rights to political participation (nineteenth century to early twentieth). In this linear model, the social and economic welfare rights stemmed from and made possible the full enjoyment of the earlier rights. The historiography of welfare often focuses on “the state,” but in the British case, it was always a “mixed economy.” That meant private charities, volunteerism, and commercial insurance companies worked alongside the state in beneficial as well as conflictual ways. For example, while the National Health Service was free to all, those who could afford it were always allowed to go instead to private doctors. The same was true for pensions and education, limiting the strength of the public option.

Across Europe, a key strain on welfare resulted from its own success. In the 1970s, the largest generation in European history was about to retire and stop paying into the system. Moreover, the population of replacement workers was not as large as previous planners had anticipated due to lower birth rates over the last two-and-a-half decades. The Keynesian economic model of planning, deficit financing, and full employment went largely unchallenged since the 1930s, but was becoming increasingly unsustainable. In Britain, as early as the publication of the Beveridge Report, Beveridge himself and others saw the financial impossibility of the plan. It was never solved, but they thought that establishing the principle of the welfare state was more important, and left the details for a later time. Beveridge’s thinking developed during the Great Depression, and as such, he believed the biggest cause of poverty was unemployment. His plan called for full employment, which was so widely expected and accepted during wartime planning that it needed no justification.

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17 Finlayson, 15.
While Beveridge envisioned unemployment of around 5 percent, in reality between 1948 and 1966 unemployment averaged just 1.7 percent. Even as actual numbers of unemployment passed one million people during the 1970s, prior to 1979 annual unemployment was kept below 6 percent.\textsuperscript{19} Poverty in post-war Britain, therefore, was not born out of unemployment until the 1980s, but it was a product of low wages and other factors.

Full-time workers on low wages created a double burden on the system. First, low wages meant workers had to apply for welfare state benefits to stay out of poverty. Beveridge envisioned National Assistance (renamed Supplementary Benefits in 1966) as a safety net for a limited minority of workers whose wages and National Insurance benefits were not adequate. In fact, National Assistance was almost universally claimed by the 1960s to top up low wages. Additionally, more pensioners and single mothers were making claims on the welfare state by the mid-1960s than anticipated. Low wages meant inadequate contributions to National Insurance as well as a reduced tax base from which to draw National Assistance payments.\textsuperscript{20} As unemployment rose, there were even fewer workers contributing to the system at the same time as more people made claims on it. By 1965, social security as a whole cost 25 percent more than Beveridge expected and pensions cost twice as much. In 1982, one third of all claimants to National Insurance also needed to claim Supplementary Benefits in order to make ends meet.\textsuperscript{21}

\textit{Welfare Benefits and Traps}

The two main forms of welfare benefits, National Insurance and National Assistance/Supplementary Benefits, were funded and distributed in distinct ways, but were often claimed together by millions of people. National Insurance was funded by taking a percentage out of a worker’s weekly pay packet plus a contribution from the employer. This money went into a general

\textsuperscript{20} Dilnot et al., 13.
\textsuperscript{21} Dilnot et al., 18.
fund to pay cash benefits to people experiencing times of unemployment, sickness, maternity, or old age. National Insurance benefits were only available to those with a history of contributions. For example, an unemployed worker could receive unemployment insurance based upon how many contributions he had made the previous tax year i.e., contributing for 50 weeks while employed would give a year of unemployment insurance, plus an Earnings Related Supplement for six months for married men.

After that time, if a man was still unemployed he would need to apply for the various means-tested National Assistance/Supplementary Benefits. These were funded by general taxation, meaning one did not need to contribute to a fund, but those who needed to claim had to fulfill a means test. Some of these benefits include heating allowance, special diet, or essential domestic help, and some lump sums to cover purchase of essential furniture, appliances, or clothing. Supplementary Benefit was paid to the (male) head of household to make up the difference between his income and the poverty line. Other benefits, such as child benefit, were paid as a right without contribution or means test to parents for each child after the first. That the lowness of the poverty line and that child benefit was only paid after the first child were two main sources of ire for claimants. In addition, claimants strongly resented the short time limits for unemployment benefits especially in the 1970s to 1980s when a crisis of unemployment limited the possible new jobs to find when the benefits stopped.

A further financial problem with the welfare state was the uncoordinated way contributions and payments interacted with the tax system. Prior to the Beveridge Plan, welfare claimants and taxpayers were two distinct groups. Beveridge extended the provision of welfare to taxpayers (meaning people in work could claim benefits). People of every income level could claim certain benefits such as family allowances and child benefits. In addition, because all incomes steadily
increased, most benefits recipients faced taxation. The “poverty trap” was an unfortunate way in which wages, benefits, and taxation interacted in a detrimental way for claimants. In essence, the poverty trap was when a low-income family lost more in terms of taxes paid and benefits received as their wages increased. This was especially the case with the introduction of the Family Income Supplement in 1971. To put this in real terms, a married couple with two children making £47 per week gross was not taxed and received various benefits to make their weekly net income £100.22 per week. But, as their take home pay increased (from raises, overtime, or a higher paying job), their net income would be gradually reduced as their wages were taxed and some of their earnings-related benefits were cut. Not until the family earned £109 per week in wages would their net weekly income be as high as it was when they were earning £47 per week plus benefits. Reliable statistics are lacking, but according to evidence from the Low Pay Unit between 1974 and 1981, 15,000 and 105,600, respectively, families were in the poverty trap. The Conservatives used this fact during Labour’s rule to decry taxation, stating the tax threshold was so low that people in poverty were paying taxes to fund their own benefits. A misunderstanding of the poverty trap influenced one negative portrayal of welfare beneficiaries that “they are better off on the dole.” The Conservative Party manifesto of 1976 expressed this notion arguing, “[I]t must always pay to work, [but] many people are now better off on social security than working. For many more, the incentive to work is negligible (emphasis in original).”

22 Dilnot et al., 3.
Three hundred years of Poor Laws caused the development of a deeply ingrained stigma about poor relief, whether private or public, in the minds of both the public and those who received aid. Beveridge’s plan envisioned that the welfare state would be open to all as a right of citizenship, and that it should not be considered charity. The National Assistance Act 1948 explicitly called for the abolition of the workhouses and the “workhouse mentality.” The reality, as usual, was different from the rhetoric. In 1965, one million old-age pensioners who were eligible for National Assistance benefits did not apply. This was possibly because people of this age group remembered the Poor Laws of the early twentieth century, and were strongly opposed to having to “go on relief.” The means-testing nature of National Assistance and later Supplementary Benefits also contributed to the low take up. Memory of Poor Law stigma among old-age pensioners does not explain why so many among the post-war generation did not claim their entitlements, however.

The public discourse about claimants was shaped by full employment, the work ethic, and the designation of “problem families.” Between 1948 and 1966, unemployment averaged just 1.7 percent annually, and was kept below 6 percent in the 1970s. This meant the majority of Britons held jobs, and they believed that waged work kept one out of poverty. The welfare state was supposed to be a safety net for those temporarily unable to support themselves through waged work. So, when people (besides the elderly or severely disabled) had to claim benefits for a long periods of time, the rest of society looked down on them as “work-shy” or “scroungers.” A survey carried out in the mid-1970s found a quarter to a third of respondents viewed claimants as “lazy” or as claiming benefits when they could work: “the people who shouldn’t get help are all those who can’t be bothered to look for work, and all those who earn too much money and have council

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25 Brown, 59.
houses.” Another respondent relayed a common theme “I go down the road and see 40 or 50 of them [claimants] in the pub.” Other perceptions were shaped by the idea that high wages and union militancy since the 1972 miners’ strike created an army of those unwilling to work who instead claimed welfare.

Mothers were meant to be fully supported by the welfare state until their child(ren) reached sixteen (or eighteen if they were in education or training), but the underlying assumption was a male breadwinner would provide the majority of support. Single mothers thus faced stigma as irresponsible drains on public assistance. The welfare authorities criticized and surveilled single, female-headed households, those with long-term unemployed or sick fathers, or young people unable or unwilling to secure a “job for life,” deeming them “problems” or “problem families.” Racial minorities and immigrants faced sharp criticism tied up with racist animosity, “they give these handouts to natural scroungers, especially foreigners…[w]ogs, spades, any foreigners. Anybody with a black face. The blacker you are the more you get. They’re just natural scroungers.”

Women’s and racial minorities’ experience with the welfare state makes up part of the next two chapters, respectively.

As is often the case, the press and politicians worked symbiotically to shape the public mentality about an important political topic. A “war on scroungers” grew out of sensationalist headlines and disproportionate prominence of “claimants” in news stories. News stories about new color televisions or other “underserved” perks were common. One story, that of “King Con” Derek Deevy took over public perception because he faced trial for fraud due to his self-claimed £36,000 benefits swindle (although the trial only substantiated an overpayment of £500). The trial of this


27 Golding and Middleton, 172-176.

28 Golding and Middleton, 166.

29 Golding and Middleton, 62.
single person made commonplace the idea that a scrounger army cheating an over-generous system existed. The “Incredible Reign of King Con” and “King of the Dole Queue Scroungers” were headlines from the *Daily Express* and *Daily Mirror* that shaped the news narrative in 1975-1976. Whether readers knew any other details or had any experience of social security, they all knew well that Derek Deevy, a claimant, spent £25 a week on Corona cigars and wore expensive suits.\(^{30}\)

After this case, a shift in media coverage from reporting on governmental aspects of welfare (e.g., rate increases) to arguing it was an over-burdened and abused system took shape. Welfare news was not a major subject but when it was reported, abuse and fraud by claimants was prominent, mostly in front-page headlines of the dailies such as this example from *The Telegraph*: “How to Be a Failure and Get Paid to Do Nothing” (29 July 1976). The heavier papers like *The Times* and *The Guardian* gave less front-page coverage, but still reported in similar fashion. The truth of fraud was about 1 ½ p of every £50 paid out was fraudulent in 1976 compared to the 100 times that simply unclaimed and only 70 people out of “the biggest racket in this country today” (Iian Sproat, MP, ITN 23 August 1976) were convicted of fraud that year. Cartoonists and television also provided a medium for creating a scrounger folk devil. BBC1’s situation comedy *Mr. Big* portrays swindling claimants giving false names to collect more “giro” checks.\(^{31}\) More subtle attacks on claimants were the irrelevant mentioning that a person was a claimant in a news story. Using emotive language such as “handouts” or “scroungers” when discussing entitlements and claimants were also a strong negative reinforcement of an already stigmatized class of society.\(^{32}\)

Fiddling the system was presented as a widespread activity of claimants. The Poor Law Reform of 1834 introduced the concept of “less eligibility” which meant people claiming public

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\(^{30}\) Golding and Middleton, 62.

\(^{31}\) Golding and Middleton, 105.

assistance should not live at a higher standard than the lowest-paid worker did. This mentality survived into the post-1945 period. The state expected claimants to live at the lowest level of society, in part as an incentive to find and keep waged work. Often missing from the discussion was that increasingly there were no jobs or those available were not sufficient to maintain a worker and his or her family. This partially explains the reception to the “scrounger-phobia” as presented by the media because if increasing numbers of people cannot support themselves, then those who do so by cheating the system become even more despised. According to Golding and Middleton, press reports of welfare abuse did not dominate headlines because it was widespread or intrinsically newsworthy, but because it made for good copy. In 1977, 485 claimants were investigated and 22 were convicted for making fraudulent claims. The investigations cost taxpayers up to £15,000. The newly created Special Investigators were less effective, but more expensive, at finding cheaters than regular DHSS staff doing their regular work. In 1977, £2.6 million were lost to fraud, but £260 million went unclaimed out of £13 billion total allocation that year. Less scrutinized by the media was tax evasion by wealthy individuals and corporations, which totaled over one billion pounds in 1977. Legal action was also heavily weighted against welfare abuse compared to tax evasion. For example, in 1972 tax evasion totaled £9 million or about £1,000 per person and only 1 percent of cases were prosecuted. In the same year, £300,000 was lost to welfare abuse, or about £21 per person, but 40 percent were prosecuted.

Key to catalyzing the development of the claimants’ unions was the belief—widespread among the Left—that the real function of the welfare state was to discipline workers to the work ethic of capitalism. The concept of “less eligibility” remained in fact as many benefits were too low

33 Golding and Middleton, 69-72.
35 Gagg et al., 13-14.
to adequately support an individual or family, this incentivizing employment. However, deindustrialization and a turn to the service economy meant many workers earned such low wages that they needed to claim benefits anyway. Both the Left and the Right criticized this as the state subsidizing low wages and thus allowing employers to continue to make profits at the expense of society. Peter Townsend argues in *Poverty in the UK* that social security was as much about controlling behavior as it was about meeting needs.\(^{36}\) Francis Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, writing about the United States, also argue that welfare's function was to regulate labor and mute disorder. The “social wage” was described as a kind of ransom to instill loyalty and reduce rebellion.\(^{37}\) The concept of a social wage was also a method of the government proclaiming its generosity for all the things it provided: education, health, protection, and culture. At the same time, the social wage justified the demand that citizens accept what was offered and to “tighten their belts” when it came time to reduce spending in order to stimulate the economy.\(^{38}\) Social security could at best alleviate the worst of poverty, but it could not end poverty, it was argued, because the nature of capitalism itself required it. What welfare was effective at was marginalizing and stigmatizing a group of people as an underclass. The claimants’ unions’ call for a guaranteed minimum income and user control of the welfare state in an economy that met the needs of people above profits developed out of this critique of the welfare state.

When workers lost or changed their jobs, they could receive unemployment benefits for up to a year. Their benefits depended on their contributions in the previous tax year to the National Insurance. However, the Industrial Misconduct Rule, established at the same time as the first Unemployment Insurance Act 1911, disqualified dole payments for six weeks for anyone who made


\(^{37}\) Dean, 11.

themselves unemployed “voluntarily.” 39 When claiming unemployment benefit, the claimant had to “sign on” at the Employment Exchange as “available for work.” Failing to do so as well as being sacked for “misconduct” or leaving a job without good cause, suspended dole payments for up to six weeks. While discretion should have prevented overly punitive disqualifications, in general, suspensions were for the full six weeks and a very narrow definition of “reasonableness” was allowed for leaving a job. Many workers found their unemployment insurance suspended if for example they quit a job in order to move to a new area. Disqualification was almost universally automatic for the maximum period. Although one could appeal, the delay might take more than six weeks, and nearly a quarter of those whose benefits were reinstated never received a refund for their wrongly disqualified period. 40

During the 1980s, Margaret Thatcher’s government deregulated employment protections. This meant that for non-unionized workers who might face fifty or more hours worked per week without overtime pay had no other option than to quit and try to find more suitable work. But, this made them “voluntarily unemployed,” and their dole checks would be suspended. If new work was not forthcoming, then they faced extreme hardship. The Industrial Misconduct Rule was designed to prevent people from quitting their job to live idle on the dole at the expense of those who worked. But in the 1980s, it took on a more coercive role. This was especially true as workers’ protections and unionization were eroded, and the suspension period was extended from six to thirteen weeks in 1986. At the same time, National Insurance contributions were no longer taken out of dole checks, so a worker faced the prospect of no unemployment insurance in the future as well. 41 When the government proposed the six-month suspension in 1988, it also limited unemployment payments to

40 Byrne and Jacobs, 15.
41 Byrne and Jacobs, 5.
only six months, potentially cutting this benefit altogether for some workers. According to the Low Pay Unit, this was evidence of the government’s coercive control of labor that further trapped people into low-paid work, poverty, and employment inflexibility.

The Labour Government abandoned full employment over 1975-1978 while also cutting spending in social services as required by the “structural readjustment” required by the 1976 loan from the International Monetary Fund. The Conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher were widely credited with dismantling the welfare state and disciplining it and the working class to neoliberal marketization. But in reality, the Beveridge consensus among Labour and Tory party leaders was mostly abandoned by the time she took office. The disciplining of welfare began with the Department of Health and Social Security Special Investigators and the increase in means testing. In addition, in 1983, Employment Secretary Norman Tebbit introduced the Regional Benefit Investigation Teams, popularly derided as “rabbits.” These special agents would gather at Unemployment Benefit Offices and request from the staff the names of all those who claimed from specific categories, such as young people or manual workers, who they assumed were fraudulently claiming. No positive evidence was needed and no prosecutions ever took place. Instead, the RBIT agent simply “persuaded” a claimant to stop claiming benefit. They did this through strong-arm tactics of intimidation, lies, and assuming the claimant’s guilt to try to get the claimant to admit to fraud. Fear and intimidation were integral to the RBITs’ work as reported in the Guardian. The Civil and Public Service Association (social security staff union), Department of Employment office staff, trade unions and unemployed workers association all united in opposition to the “rabbits” and eventually this style of policing was abandoned.

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Thatcher’s government struck against the welfare state in other ways. Her governmental philosophy took for granted that Britain was too concerned with distributing wealth rather than creating it. This had caused the public to develop an insatiable hunger for such “handouts” as education, health, and welfare without the means to sustain them according to her ilk. Beginning in 1980, Conservative policy was to cut benefits and curtail National Insurance. The Social Security Act (1980) cut uprating of pensions to keep current with prices of earnings. The Social Security Act (1981) ended indexation, taxed short-term benefits, ended earnings-related supplements, and reduced Supplementary Benefits to strikers’ families. The Social Security Act (1982) further increased the means-tested benefits. This reversed 30-year progress away from them. Finally, the 1984 Fowler report made official the end of the Beveridge consensus which had been steadily eroded since the mid-1960s.

Low Take Up

The stigma about welfare state claimants contributed significantly to the low take up of benefits. At the social security office, each claimant was treated as an isolated, individual “problem” case that the welfare state was meant to fix. Completely removed from the discussion was the ways in which capitalist society generally needs and perpetuates poverty and unemployment. Also undiscussed was the ways in which the welfare state supported the capitalist system by subsidizing low wages. In concrete terms, the “rediscovery of poverty” as articulated by Townsend, Abel-Smith, and Titmuss in the 1960s was the exclusion of those in need from the state benefits to which they

were entitled. Donnison and Titmuss argued welfare state professionals got in the way of claimants, especially in the case of emergency needs payments and other discretionary payments.\textsuperscript{45} Means testing increased in the late 1960s, which reduced claims even further from an already stigmatized as well as over-burdened system. Moreover, means testing was more expensive to administer than the non-means-tested entitlements such as Child Benefit.\textsuperscript{46} This, of course, increased the public antipathy toward claimants and discouraged claims. In 1965, 700,000 eligible pensioners did not claim benefits; this increased to 980,000 in 1972. In 1965, one quarter of families under pensionable age did not claim their entitlements; in 1972, this number was 800,000 people, 250,000 of whom were in full-time work.\textsuperscript{47}

The unemployed who did not claim unemployment insurance or eligible means-tested benefits rose from 57,000 in 1965 to 100,000 in 1973.\textsuperscript{48} The government introduced Family Income Supplement in 1971, spent £785,000 on advertising, and wanted 85 percent take up.\textsuperscript{49} But, take up of this benefit was never more than 50 percent.\textsuperscript{50} Rent and rate rebates had such a low take up that after the first survey in 1965-6 showed only 57 percent claimed, the government refused to conduct another survey. Also low were the so-called passport benefits such as free school meals, free milk, free prescriptions, and other non-cash benefits that a family was automatically entitled to if they already received Family Income Supplement. Only about one percent claimed in 1971 despite the government spending about £200,000 on advertising.\textsuperscript{51} Discretionary payments, such as for furniture, extra heat, or clothes required the claimant to know what to claim for and how to claim it,

\textsuperscript{45} Finlayson, 316.
\textsuperscript{46} Hemming, 35-36.
\textsuperscript{48} House of Commons HANSARD, 26 March 1974, vol 871, cols 73-4.
\textsuperscript{49} Lister, 3.
\textsuperscript{50} Hemming, 35-36.
\textsuperscript{51} Lister, 5-6.
so most of these additional benefits had an extremely low take up. One intervention of the
claimants’ unions was to list in their publications exactly what could be asked for and how to ask for
it in order to make up the official secrecy around discretionary payments.

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In the mid-1970s, it became almost common knowledge among government officials, welfare professionals, and voluntary welfare workers that those most in need of benefits were the least likely to claim them. Ignorance of entitlements, public and personal stigma of needing “charity,” and the complicated bureaucracy all played a part. In addition, the low payment of claimed benefits turned people off from claiming. Benefits were also inadequate for those who did claim. If the goal of the welfare state was to keep people out of poverty, then by the 1970s, it was clear that it failed. Commentators on the left, including the claimants’ unions, argued that welfare state could not by design eradicate poverty, while those on the right would posit that it only created dependency with essentially the same effect. Those arguments will be dealt with below. For now, a brief
A discussion of living on inadequate benefits will illustrate the precipitating factors of the development of the claimants’ unions.

*Living on the Dole*

The often cited “they’re better off on the dole” myth actually contained a kernel of truth. As was mentioned above about 100,000 workers had wages so low that claiming was necessary. For most people, however, unemployment or other benefits meant merely “existing” rather than living. According to the Child Poverty Action Group, one of the main organizations in the “poverty lobby,” Supplemental Benefits over the course of the 1970s were 50 percent lower than what was needed to meet the minimum requirements for a family of four. Also cited was the child benefit of £10.90 for 13-15 year olds in 1980, when CPAG calculated the bare minimum needed to be £21.90. When the National Assistance Board was replaced by the Supplementary Benefits Commission, little more than the name changed. Nonetheless, the Commission outlined regulations of what claimants were expected to be able to purchase on their benefits. It might be an exercise in utopianism, but it is worthwhile to understand at what level the government itself thought claimants could live while on benefit. They should be able to buy:

- Food, household fuel, the purchase, cleaning and repair and replacement of clothing and footwear, normal travel costs, weekly laundry costs, miscellaneous household expenses such as toilet articles, cleaning materials, window-cleaning and the replacement of small household goods (for example, crockery, cutlery, cooking utensils, light bulbs) and leisure and amenity items such as television licenses and rental, newspapers, confectionary and tobacco.

The Royal Commission on the Distribution of Income and Wealth argued that many families could not possibly meet all these expenses on the basic rates. The amount of claims for discretionary payments was evidence enough of that. In 1979, more than one million Exceptional Needs

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52 Burghes, 5.
Payments were granted. These were lump sums given to claimants to top up their basic benefits to meet additional costs such as clothing, furniture, appliances, heating, or other needs.

The Supplementary Benefits Commission also posited a “fair scheme” for claimants. This included that benefits rates must be set and adjusted every year to keep up with costs. The rates were set in November but not put into effect until April, meaning the rates were always five months behind inflation and subjected to further price increases between April and November. However, the Commission still stated that claimants should be able “to participate in the life of the community.” In part this meant living in reasonably warm houses, be well fed, have respectable clothing so as to keep their dignity at work, school, or in interviews. Children should not feel ashamed at school due to their clothing or shoes. Parents should be able to give birthday and Christmas presents. Claimants should be able to maintain relations with friends and relatives and keep memberships to religious groups, trade unions, or other activities that require disposable income. This “fair scheme” was part of the long-term effort of the welfare state to diminish the “Poor Law Mentality” that made claimants pariahs and divided the poor into “deserving” and “undeserving.” Unfortunately, due to many of the reasons previously cited, the “fair scheme” was not successful.

A survey conducted in 1980 recorded the day-to-day reality of 65 families who relied on supplementary benefits. Their stories strongly contradict the rhetoric of the Supplementary Benefits Commission’s regulations and fair scheme. While the exact amount of benefits and prices changed over the course of the period under discussion, it is reasonable to assume that the general features of life on the dole did not vary much between 1966 and 1980. The biggest problem for claimants was meeting financial obligations. The majority could not stretch their weekly benefits to cover their

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55 Burghes, 7.
basic needs. This fundamental problem led to difficulties elsewhere such as meeting housing costs, adequate nutrition, heating, clothing, furniture and appliances, and not to mention outings, treats, presents: all of which are described as “participating in the life of the community” by the government. Many families had to decide between rent and food or other arrangements of going without one thing in order to pay for another. Fifty-two percent of the families surveyed also needed to borrow from friends or relatives, with the resulting debts becoming endemic.57 Families borrowed most often just to buy food; covering the costs of fuel, clothing and footwear, furniture, and birthdays were next on the list. Emergencies such as hospital stays, illness, or death were also extreme financial strains on families, preventing them from making ends meet. The Supplementary Benefits system provided Exceptional Needs Payments for such emergencies. Two problems affected the take up of ENPs: lack of knowledge by claimants of what to claim, and the length of time between claiming and payment.58 Families on Supplementary Benefit were often in debt, sometimes to the SBC itself, which would deduct from a current payment to cover an earlier expense.

Food and heating were the next biggest shortcomings for families living on Supplementary Benefit. Parents frequently skipped meals so their children could eat, and all families surveyed often went without fresh fruit, fish, or butter as well as never bought treats like jams and cakes.59 Life was cold on supplementary benefits. People on low incomes tended to live in older, harder to heat accommodations. Moreover, fuel bills were often charged quarterly, making it difficult to budget for people on low income or benefits. The constant British damp also meant needing to run the heat more often than necessary for warmth just to keep the problem at bay. Many families borrowed to cover heating or had their fuel bill automatically deducted from their weekly benefits, which

57 Burghes, 19.  
58 Burghes, 21.  
59 Burghes, 31.
prevented the heat from being disconnected but also increased their financial strain as many would have gone without heat in order to pay for other things.\textsuperscript{60} Furthermore, families on supplementary benefits often could not afford to adequately clothe themselves or their children. This had the effects of lacking warm clothes during the cold seasons (or in a cold house), constantly needing to replace worn out, low-quality clothing, and the social stigma (especially for children) of having to wear second-hand clothing. Parents sometimes also could not afford school uniforms, and this sometimes resulting in their children not being able to attend.\textsuperscript{61} Clearly, these families were not living under a “fair scheme” or “participating in the life of the community.”

\textbf{Supplemental Benefits Scale Rates for a Married Couple with Two Children as a Proportion of Average Male Net Incomes.}\textsuperscript{62}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Ordinary SB %</th>
<th>Long-Term SB %</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nov-70</td>
<td>50.6</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sep-71</td>
<td>52.2</td>
<td>54.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oct-72</td>
<td>50.3</td>
<td>52.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oct-73</td>
<td>50.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jul-74</td>
<td>52.4</td>
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<td>Apr-75</td>
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<td>60</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nov-79</td>
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\textit{The Claimants’ Unions}

The growth of the claimants’ unions resulted from the presence of nearly eight million people in poverty and rising unemployment in the late-1960s. It also stemmed directly from what

\textsuperscript{60} Burghes, 41.
\textsuperscript{61} Burghes, 60.
\textsuperscript{62} Burghes, 10.
they termed “intimidation” and “mystification.” Mystification has already been dealt with as the inability of claimants to get information about their rights to benefits. Intimidation took the form of Social Security office clerks treating each application as an isolated problem who was undeserving of help, ignorant of the system, and should quietly accept whatever benefits were given. Claimants were routinely threatened with prosecution and Visiting Officers had the power to surveil them for fraud. Special Investigators routinely spied on single mothers for cohabitation. For determining benefits, a husband’s and wife’s income were considered together. This was also the case for a man and woman living together “as husband and wife.” The welfare state assumed a male-breadwinner model until the late 1970s, and as such assumed the man’s income or benefits would support the woman. However, if a single woman on benefits had a boyfriend who sometimes slept at her house, she could potentially be accused of violating the cohabitation rule because the authorities assumed the man should support her. The claimants’ unions most persistently and vehemently attacked the so-called cohabitation rule until it was repealed in the 1980s.

Special Investigators made unannounced visits to women’s houses to try to find evidence of a man living there. They interviewed neighbors, followed male guests home and questioned them about their living arrangements. If the investigator’s suspicions were strong enough, they would take the woman’s Supplementary Benefits book, suspend her payments, and make her sign a prepared statement admitting to fraud. The Department of Social Security defined cohabitation as a man and woman sleeping together for three consecutive nights. Then he would be expected to be financially support her. A single mother also faced coercion to name the father and sue him for maintenance if she tried to claim benefits. The breadwinner model also meant women had no rights to child benefits claimed by their husbands. An unemployed female head of household could not claim

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65 Claimants’ Newspaper no. 2 (Autumn 1974), 2.
additional payments for her children or husband the way an unemployed man could. She could only claim a pension for herself, not her husband, and her pension only accrued for the time she was married; any work she did before marriage was disregarded. More about how women interacted with the welfare state will be discussed in chapter three. Ending the “cohabitation rule” was a prime source of solidarity between the claimants’ unions and the Women’s Liberation Movement.

The first claimants’ union in Birmingham eventually influenced the development of unions up and down the United Kingdom. They fashioned themselves similarly to trade unions, only they were organized to collectively bargain with the government for increased and improved welfare. They demanded full entitlement to all possible benefits and control of the welfare state by those who used it. Like others in the “poverty lobby,” the claimants’ unions thought welfare state “professionals” got in between its services and those who needed them. Some of their demands were quite mundane such as extra food vouchers for holidays or not sending Giro checks through the mail because that was isolating for claimants, and they could get lost. Other demands were more directly confrontational with the system such as abolishing discretionary payments or providing an adequate guaranteed minimum income for all people. The Birmingham model included demands for higher Supplementary Benefits and a minimum wage for all. They wanted the end of the “four-week rule,” which cut unemployment insurance from unskilled workers after four weeks. They called for ending the means tests, no secret codes, a wage slip for claimants, and the right to control the appeals tribunals. Furthermore, the Union demanded the right to suitable jobs and turning over the welfare system to claimants. Eventually, this was adopted as the basic national charter of the National Federation of Claimants’ Unions, formed in 1970:

1. The right to an adequate income without means test for all people
2. A socialist society in which all necessities are provided free and controlled directly by the people.

3. No secrets and the right to full information
4. No distinction between so-called deserving and undeserving

This charter was printed on the back of The Journal of the National Federation of Claimants’ Unions, Claimants’ Newspaper, and Claimants’ Unite! the three main publications of the movement, as well as in their various guide books. The Birmingham union was the first and served as a theoretical progenitor, but each union was independent and autonomous. The National Federation functioned more as a forum to express problems and ideas to try to more or less shape overall goals of the movement. Each branch tried to form a passionate sense of “our union” and directly responded to local circumstances to prevent a centralized, top-down model. The horizontally organized, federation-based movement allowed for flexibility and prevented a dogmatic separatism. The claimants’ unions’ interacted with reformists like CPAG and centralized organizations like the trade unions or the Labour Party itself.

Politically, the claimants’ unions wanted first to force the government to abolish the welfare state as it existed and recreate it to be more open, accessible, and generous. They then wanted the implementation of a guaranteed minimum income for all people. This was to be distributed to all people in the same way Child Benefit was distributed to all parents or in the way education was free for all and the NHS provided free medical care for all. All the while, they argued the welfare state could not alleviate poverty but in fact maintained capitalism, which created and needed poverty, paid low wages, and made things society does not need.67 The claimants’ unions’ end goal was a communist society, but they seemed to regard it as no contradiction to use the welfare state they regarded as propping up capitalism as a means of overthrowing it. While living on benefits, claimants could pursue other occupations instead of low-wage industrial work. The unions expressed hostility toward the “right to work” as it often meant working in dirty, demeaning, or

67 Journal of the National Federation of Claimants Unions no. 2 Jan 1971, 6. As well as many other CU publications.
dangerous (i.e., weapons manufacturing) work. They thought nearly ten million people were “mal-employed,” meaning in banking, the service industry, or making weapons.\(^6^8\) As deindustrialization took hold, the claimants’ unions were not the only ones who thought useful work producing useful goods was ending. Furthermore, they argued that the work ethic and “right to work” all amounted to “wage slavery” doing meaningless work. Instead, they argued everyone should have the “right not to work” with a minimum income guaranteed so one could pursue education, community service, caring work, creative work, or at least be supported while between other traditional jobs.\(^6^9\) Ultimately, the claimants’ unions did not let their rather idealistic goals and push toward communism prevent them from working in more practical, and successful, ways to support those on benefits.

Claimants’ Unions and the Working Class

The claimants’ union movement cannot be fully understood without examining the state of the English working class undergoing deindustrialization. The phenomenon of low take up and the “poverty traps” especially affected members of the working class while also shaping what being working class meant. The welfare state had a complicated relationship with the working class. On the one hand, slum clearances, social housing, access to free health care and education along with subsidies for food and wage supplements greatly improved the quality of life for many Britons at the bottom of the social hierarchy. But, claiming from the welfare state also meant being subjected to inefficiency, indifference, humiliation, and surveillance over one’s personal life.\(^7^0\) The “social wage” filled the role of a ransom for loyalty and good behavior from the working class while at the same time eroding their means of subsistence and independence. Beginning in the late 1960s, unemployment crept steadily upward. In 1971, there were one million unemployed Britons for the

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\(^6^8\) The Claimants’ Union Guide for the Unemployed, n.d., 8.


\(^7^0\) Dean, 3.
first time. In the early 1980s, the number was over three million. William Beveridge in particular envisioned the welfare state as preventing poverty for those who had lost their job due to market forces outside of their control. However, only about 40 percent of unemployed workers in the 1970s received unemployment benefits (and these for a maximum of one year) with about 20 percent of them needing to claim additional benefits to stay out of poverty. The claimants’ unions argued that because so many workers needed to claim benefits just to make ends meet and that those out of work barely scraped by on their benefits, the whole welfare state system needed to be completely overhauled.

The core of the claimants’ unions’ ideology was reversing the profit motive of capitalism to an economic model dedicated to providing for all people adequate minimum needs. From this basic level—their arguments went—people could choose work that they found fulfilling, and employers would be forced to pay higher wages to attract employees who no longer faced starvation. The relationship of capitalism and the welfare state as it existed, however, was to pressure people into low paid work that maintained consumerism. The claimants’ unions were not explicitly Situationists, but similar critiques of late capitalism filled their literature. Early on, the *Journal of the National Federation of Claimants Unions* targeted militarism, the space race, and advertisement-fueled mass consumption as the primary wastes of money and technology that could better be used to improve the quality of all peoples’ lives. The welfare state propped up late capitalism by mandating that claimants sign on weekly as “available for work” and were expected to take the first job offered no

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71 Burghes, 9; *Unemployment Special no. 2 Manchester Claimants’ Union ca. 1971, 1.*


matter the pay or conditions. In addition, with earnings-related supplements or Family Income Supplement, the welfare state took on the burden of topping up a worker’s income, thus letting the employer off the hook for paying such low wages in the first place. The state’s subsidy of low wages had the further effect of diminishing working-class militancy because it disincentivized them from organizing together to demand better wages from their employers. The “wage-stop” meant no one on unemployment could earn as much as if they were in work. The “four-week rule” cut benefits off for unskilled workers if they did not find a new job in four weeks. Most women (two-thirds of married and one-third of unmarried) never claimed the dole because their contributions were often inadequate and their wages were half of a man’s to begin with.75 These working and claiming conditions were the object of the claimants’ unions’ activism.

The Labour Party and the trade unions (especially the Trades Union Congress) had been considered the stalwarts of the whole working class through most of the twentieth century. They earned this regard by keeping employment levels high with good wages and a robust welfare state. The problem of poverty was understood simply as some people being left out of the general affluence and prosperity of society. But the claimants’ unions joined other voices on the Left to argue that it was the structure of capitalism and state intervention which precipitated the widening income distribution and wealth inequality.76 A whole “welfare-state gap” literature developed during the academic “rediscovery of poverty” in the 1960s, which argued the overall welfare state worked perfectly, but there were certain holes. Poverty was treated like a technical problem and left to the experts to solve. The well-meaning “poverty lobby,” including the Child Poverty Action Group, welfare rights workers, and radical social workers like CaseCon all operated within the status quo system. Starting with Townsend and Abel-Smith’s call in The Poor and the Poorest that the best solution

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75 The Claimants’ Union Guide for the Unemployed, 44.
to the problem of those left out of the system was a radical review of that system.\textsuperscript{77} What was missing from this analysis was the personal experience of poverty and the extent to which those in poverty see poverty as a class problem and thus see themselves as a class.\textsuperscript{78}

The “poverty lobby” unwittingly supported the government and the role of technologies in fracturing the working class. Productive industries were rewarded with high wages but also were more likely to incorporate technologies that made them more productive at the same time as reducing the workforce. The less economically productive (i.e., nationalized) industries had less ability to increase production and had to resort to cutting wages or cutting workers (redundancies) in order to stay buoyant. A split developed over the late-1960s to early-1970s between those who worked in old, manual-labor-intensive industries and those who worked in more technological or service industries. Many in the service sector earned lower wages than had the old industries at the height of full employment, but they also were rarely organized into strong unions. But as the traditional industries closed or outsourced, an increasing number of older, skilled manual workers and newer unskilled or service workers needed to make claims on the welfare state. The “poverty lobby,” in seeking to reform the system from within, failed to address the overall, larger problems with capitalism itself. In assessing the welfare state as overall successful, it necessarily meant that those who were not fully assisted by it must be “problems.”

Ever since the first Poor Laws, English poverty discourse has been steeped in the distinction between “deserving” and “undeserving.” In part, this has meant that those who claim public relief must be made to perform some sort of work and to remain or be conditioned into being “productive.” Even the poverty lobby would make this distinction when they argued those who fell through were problems. During the Depression years, it was difficult to condemn all those in

\textsuperscript{78} Jordan, 2.
poverty as unproductive and undeserving. The economic forces outside their control in part led to the establishment of the welfare state in the first place. Yet, in an age of full employment and social security, the public was less willing to give sympathy to those who could not support themselves. Furthermore, the government led the charge that it was the workers and unions who caused higher unemployment and higher prices.79

Although the workhouses were abolished with the National Assistance Act 1948, reception centers remained, which were hardly different. A Supplemental Benefits recipient with no fixed address was compelled (with threat of the loss of benefit) to go to a reception center to live, often far from their usual surroundings where they would be employed for long days carving blocks of wood or making simple benches. The stated goal was to re-train and discipline “work-shy” claimants into productive workers. Nevertheless, according to the Secret AX Code, the real purpose was to make life so restrictive and boring that a claimant would accept any kind of work simply to escape the “modern day work house.”80 Another option for the underemployed was the Employment Centers that would contract out workers to other companies, often low-paid and insecure jobs, and the Center would gain a profit. These workers had no union support or protections and were made to do the dirtiest and most boring work, frequently as strikebreakers. While contracted with a Center but not actually in paid work, they could not receive any benefits because they were technically “not available for work.” The “lump” was the last place in which unrestrained profit motive hurt workers and sidestepped the protections of the welfare state. The so-called lump was daily sub-contracting, typically in the building trade. Its primary consequences were low wages, no unionization, tax evasion, and reduced quality and safety. Workers were offered a daily rate from which no National Insurance or taxes were deducted. This resulted in a higher immediate wage, which attracted

79 The Claimants’ Union Guide for the Unemployed, 4.
80 The Claimants’ Union Guide for the Unemployed, 38.
workers, but it also meant no future protections if they were needed while also reducing the revenue to support the working-class and nation as a whole. Workers “on the lump” found they had difficulty finding regular employment later on, in part because they might face prosecution for not paying contributions during their “lump” days. Unemployment and various forms of temporary or punitive work shaped the claimants’ unions’ demands for revolutionary change in social security as well as an adequate guaranteed minimum income.

The claimants’ unions opposed the capitalist work ethic and what they termed “wage slavery,” but they did not disregard those workers who tried to improve or save their jobs. Early claimants’ union activity involved supporting workers on strike. Theoretically, strikers could not claim any unemployment insurance or Supplementary Benefits for themselves, but they could claim for their dependents and have their rent paid during the strike. However, many strikers found it difficult to claim from the social security and were often lost in a confusion of claiming benefits, means tests, and the issue of strike pay, so the claimants’ unions stepped in to assist. Eventually, they published the Claimants Handbook for Strikers, which walked a striker through the claiming process systematically. Strikers who claimed benefits were in the unenviable position of both fighting their bosses for better wages and working conditions while also trying to get what their families needed to survive during the industrial dispute. Many saw claiming benefits as being as hard as fighting their bosses.

Official strikes could have difficulty claiming Supplementary Benefits for their families, but wildcat strikers had no right whatsoever to either social security or to strike pay. These two factors contributed to the claimants’ unions’ contention that the DHSS was a “strike breaker” because the financial strain of no benefits for a striker’s family while on the picket meant a strike might be

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81 The Claimants' Union Guide for the Unemployed, 40-41.
shortened or a compromise with an employer reached under duress to prevent the family’s starvation. The claimants’ unions were so inundated with requests for help from strikers during the years 1968-1971, that they urged strikers to form their own temporary strike claims committees, using the *Handbook* for guidance. A key piece of advice was the hidden fact that while strikers could not claim for themselves under Section 10 of the 1966 Act, they could claim emergency payments under Sections 7 and 13, and the social security clerk had to issue a Giro right over the counter.\(^{83}\)

The claimants’ union support for strikers highlighted their rather ambiguous relationship with organized labor. They thought employment and unemployment were both integral aspects of building working-class strength. That is, they did not want a division between those who worked and those who did not to impede their struggle toward communism and an economy based on providing for everyone’s real needs.\(^{84}\) The claimants’ unions were always at best suspicious of the trade unions especially the Trades Union Congress. They argued the top-down bureaucratic nature of a centralized organization meant that expediency and scoring political points took precedence over supporting and defending the workers. Moreover, the emphasis on workers and the work ethic meant the trade unions, the Labour Party, and the whole labor movement left out those who were unemployed. The “right to work” ideology of Labour and the TUC amounted to creating menial, low-wage, and insecure work while allowing good-paying, secure jobs to disappear. The claimants’ unions regarded the TUC’s acceptance of wage restraint, the “social contract” and shop-floor harmony as the ultimate betrayal while contributing to reduced living standards and the weakening of organized labor.\(^{85}\)

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\(^{82}\) *Journal of the National Federation of Claimants Unions* no. 2 Jan 1971, 4.  
\(^{83}\) *Claimants Handbook for Strikers* ca. 1971, 11.  
\(^{84}\) *Claimants Unite: Claimants Newspaper* no 11, 7  
\(^{85}\) *Claimants Unite: Claimants Newspaper* no 11, 8.
The claimants’ unions always stylized themselves as an organizing movement to raise class-consciousness and solidarity among those who claim state benefits in a struggle against capitalist-controlled economy and government. They tried to forge links with trade unions because that was where the organizing power and traditions of the working class had always been. But they also envisioned a different outcome for society than did the unions and pressed most forcefully for a guaranteed minimum income for all. Like their relationship with the “poverty lobby,” the claimants’ unions once again tried not to let their long-term idealism hinder their more concrete immediate actions. One clear example of this was their support of those who could be considered their most direct oppressors: the social security office clerks.

The cuts to social spending, rising unemployment, and the public stigma toward claimants all influenced how social security clerks interacted with claimants. More often than not, the clerk would come from a higher social, economic, and educational background than most claimants. This contributed to the hostility and intimidation toward claimants. In addition, because social security clerks were the embodiment of how the system could work for those who applied themselves successfully, they had perhaps and even deeper conception of “deserving” or “undeserving” users of the welfare state. An attitude of benefit money being the personal property of the social security clerk, which they could only “dole” out to deserving claimants, pervaded the entire system.

Moreover, as members of the white-collar working class, they often had very little idea of what living on benefits entailed. Personal prejudices could easily combine with pressures from above, secret codes, reduced budgets, and increased numbers of claimants as the economy turned downward in the 1970s. Despite all this potential and actual hostility, there were instances of class-based solidarity across the counter.

In April 1976, the Swansea Department of Health and Social Security began installing asbestos ceiling tiles at the local office. This was during business hours, exposing claimants and
social security clerks to the dangerous dust. The clerks, all members of the Civil and Public Servants Association (CPSA), immediately walked out on strike. The Swansea Claimants’ Union was leafletting at the time, and as soon as they established what was happening also joined the picket in support of the clerks. Although the clerks refused to return to work until the dust was cleaned, they still filed claims that Friday so claimants would have their money for the weekend. In November of 1976, the CPSA staged a national strike and lobby of Parliament to protest working conditions, which had worsened due to increasing claims and budget cuts. They also mandated an overtime ban. Once again, the claimants’ union acknowledged how this strike would directly and negatively affect them, but they argued “by their industrial action the SS staff will be taking a lead in the fight against the cuts and unemployment.” They also urged all their members to “forge links with the CPSA members by showing our support for any industrial action they take.”

The conditions of the social security offices affected both sides of the counter. They were often too small for how many people were there. There were hard, industrial chairs bolted to the floor. The offices were too hot in the summer, too cold in the winter and had no toilets, water fountains, children’s play places, or food available. Claimants had to wait an average of two hours, and would often be told to leave at closing time and to come back the next day contrary to DHSS rules. The SS clerks, understandably, refused to work overtime unless they hired more employees. The claimants’ unions supported this demand because it obviously benefitted them as well as fellow members of the working class. While their relationship was generally one of mutual indifference and frustration, there were points when the claimants’ unions and the social security clerks forged an

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86 Claimants Unite: Incorporating Claimants Newspaper no. 7 (April 1976), 1.
87 Claimants Unite: Claimants Newspaper no 10, 1 and 10.
alliance against the bigger forces of the DHSS managers, the government, and capitalism that caused both groups increasing distress.

Case Study: Newton Abbot Claimants’ Union

The fracturing of working-class communities and working-class identities which accompanied deindustrialization, rising unemployment, slum clearances and many other factors in the 1960s – 1970s created spaces where disillusionment and alienation took hold. In some cases, primarily outside Britain, this could lead to revolutionary violence. The United Kingdom was spared the kind of left-wing violence that other parts of Europe experienced during the 1970s. There simply was no equivalent to West Germany’s *Rote Armee Fraktion* or Italy’s *Brigate Rosse*. However, disillusionment and alienation resulting from late capitalism still manifested itself among the poor

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and unemployed. The loss of work—even in cases when an entire community was made redundant when a factory closed—was largely experienced as a personal failure and the entirety of the welfare state and even the “poverty lobby” perpetuated this idea of personal “problems” resulting in poverty. Signing on at the employment exchange as one unemployed person was in order to get a job that will fix that one problem, but not the problem of unemployment itself. Over time, the unemployed person would develop a sense of identity revolving around signing on, his only time of social activity. The stigma continued as friends and relations kept their distance in their employed lives. Claimants’ unions understood and tried to address the problem of long-term unemployed and those on benefits for extended periods, recognizing the diminished motivation and feelings of helplessness and hopelessness among those who for so long have had to subject themselves to the routine of being a pauper.

One of the few book-length treatments of forming a claimants’ union by a member is Bill Jordan’s *Paupers: The Making of the New Claiming Class* written in 1973 about the Newton Abbot Claimants’ Union. In it, Jordan argues that claimants’ unions and other “self-help groups” primarily fought to advance an individual’s rights within the social security system. But, they also exemplified ways in which certain sectors of the poor working class have rejected the organizational and representational functions of trade unions and the Labour Party to instead try to come together on their own terms.\(^9\) The book is about poor people and how being poor affects their daily lives beyond the statistics that the trade unions, poverty lobby, and Labour Party rely on. Instead, Jordan takes the line typical of other claimants’ unions that poverty has nothing to do with the welfare state and that solving poverty cannot result from reforms to the welfare state. The underlying contradictions of capitalism and the social conditions that stigmatize and allow the exploitation of

\(^9\) Jordan, 1-3.
the poor must be critiqued and challenged mainly by those who suffer from these conditions.\textsuperscript{91} People who suffer poverty often thought in terms of oppression and exploitation but also in terms of “deservingness” and personal failure, so it was hard to organize the poor at the political level. Too often, when poverty was widespread, society rallied to save those who are deserving e.g., families impoverished after the father was made redundant due to trade imbalances. But society quickly condemned and forgot about the undeserving such as foreigners, those with big families, or anyone considered “work shy.” The welfare state disincentivized the poor by ensuring they barely subsisted but also could not enjoy the benefits of higher productivity in industry. The revolutionary Left argued this was all part of the plan. The state furnished enough food, shelter, health care, and education to support a docile reserve army of unemployed who maintained low wages and high profits.\textsuperscript{92}

Therefore, the Newton Abbot Claimant Union tried to organize poor people at a more personal and quotidian level. They began by orchestrating a vegetable growing patch on an empty lot at the edge of town. The Claimant Union worked together to till, plant, tend, and harvest their vegetables and then distribute them among their membership, so at least some of their Giro checks could be saved. They organized a publicity stunt and protest in which they gave out heads of lettuce at the Labour Exchange office in front of the press. This established their principle that the Claimant Union could distribute “union benefits” to its members, which would not jeopardize their social security payments.\textsuperscript{93} The overall thrust of their operation was to develop solidarity and form class consciousness among claimants to take care of themselves and each other. Jordan reasonably cites E.P. Thompson’s description of the English working class in 1790-1830 who, when forced into

\textsuperscript{91} Jordan, 3.  
\textsuperscript{92} Jordan, 11.  
\textsuperscript{93} Jordan, 37.
“political and social apartheid” it was “the poor who helped everyone his neighbor.” After the vegetable garden, the Union formed at food co-operative. Here, they pooled all their benefit money to buy food in bulk and then allow Union members to shop for an hour and half each Friday. About 20-30 families shopped here buying food at about 25 percent less than the local shops. Once again, here was collective self-help improving the daily lives of those on benefits.

The vegetable garden and food co-op reflected the large percentage of unemployed people in the Newton Abbot Claimants’ Union. Unlike some other claimants’ unions, those in Newton Abbot wanted to act against the enforced idleness of unemployment and were not content to exist dependent on benefits. They wanted to counter the narrative of “lazy claimants” but wanted to do so in a way that reflected long-established working-class mutual aid, self-sufficiency, and pride. A key feature of the Newton Abbot Claimant Union was how it put to work unemployed workers in their experienced fields. Their first effort was to contract with a newly built estate owned by a housing association. The CU got jobs for out-of-work builders to build the community center with the housing association paying a fair wage, not to the workers directly, but to the claimants’ union as a “donation.” This “donation” would then be equally divided among all the Union members as a “union benefit” and thus would not endanger their social security payments. This scheme was not entirely novel as there have been periods of high unemployment in which employed workers would agree to fewer hours and pay so that unemployed workers might have work in the same industry: a cut in one’s personal circumstances but a boost for the class overall. This was the ideology, but the claimants’ union faced criticism that their scheme would undercut jobs and wages for employed workers. They countered this by insisting only the unemployed with relevant skills would be

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95 Jordan, 39.
96 Jordan, 56.
contracted to work certain jobs. Many unemployed builders and electricians found work this way maintaining and repairing dilapidated housing estates. In addition, the claimants’ union asked the “donation” be paid at the going rate for the kind of work in the area, to not undercut local wages. The claimant workforce would still be appealing for those who needed jobs done because they did not have to pay any overheads. This scheme risked casualization of work much like the so-called lump, but the claimants’ union thought the benefits of worker control and economic independence outweighed the possible negative consequences.

The Newton Abbot scheme of putting unemployed claimants to work in unofficial capacities represented the ways in which a local branch of the National Federation could proceed in ways that were starkly different from the usual while also maintaining the same overall goals. The work scheme was a way for workers to control their useful productivity instead of working to increase profit. They also empowered themselves as a class because each worker’s “wages” would collectively benefit all claimants who were part of the union. In these ways, this scheme was regarded as a way to undermine the wage system and economic exploitation. The reaction of the state seemed to validate this notion because the work scheme was deemed gainful employment and those so engaged had their Giros cut off. The clear implications were that the welfare state did not want claimants in any way to supplement their low benefits or, possibly, demonstrate any self-sufficiency or independence. While the claimants’ union decried what they saw as the state forcing workers into a desperate search for any job at any wage and thus keep capitalism going, as often was the case, the Newton Abbot Claimants’ Union simply adjusted in the best way for its members. They kept the work scheme, but asked their employers to only pay up to the 75p per day allowed for those claiming benefits to earn, which were then still pooled and distributed among members to forge a collective consciousness and demonstrate mutual aid.
Solidarity at the SS Office and at the Appeals Tribunal

A primary goal of the claimants’ union movement was to put decision-making power of the welfare state in the claimants’ hands. This was more of an idealistic goal than a concrete tactic. However, what claimants’ unions did was increase the confidence of claimants to demand full and better entitlements and not to simply accept what was given by the state. The “poverty lobby” and professional “experts” were held under suspicion by regular claimants and especially by claimants’ unionists. A long history of resentment against middle-class expert advice or policies for the poor seems to constantly bubble just below the surface of claimants’ unions’ literature. The CPAG as well as Welfare Rights Officers are denounced as “tame and politically castrated.” The trade unions and community development program funds from the government are regarded as coopting grass-roots militancy. The claimants’ unions believed direct action was the best course for reclaiming a sense of working-class dignity as well as the best way to train claimants in how to run the welfare state system for themselves.

All current and recent claimants to the welfare state could and were encouraged to join or create a claimants’ union. This was intended to build solidarity and reduce shame among those who were so thoroughly stigmatized as lazy and lacking autonomy or initiative because they were claimants. Claimants’ union literature was filled with tiny snippets of a new member coming to realize she was not alone and there were people like her who faced similar challenges and who could give effective support and advice. Those who had claimed with the intent of providing valuable and useful information wrote the claimants’ unions’ guidebooks. They are written in simple language; they contain several illuminating illustrations; and each one has the current benefits scale rates printed on the back. Unlike the official guidebooks, they were available for a few pence and

97 Claimants’ Newspaper no. 1 (Summer 1974), 11.
distributed among union branches, so people could consult them free. The claimants’ unions’
demand for a right to full information was one field in which they took the initiative for themselves.

The mantra of “never meet the SS alone” was printed on all claimants’ unions’ literature, and
they took this statement very seriously. In the early days of their activism, they distributed leaflets
promoting their union or advertising what entitlements people could claim. Eventually, they began
accompanying claimants to the claimant interview with the intention of preventing any intimidation
from the SS clerk or to be a witness in a later appeal tribunal if necessary. The Civil and Public
Service Association asserted that only people seeking claims that day could be present in the SS
offices and only those being interviewed could be in the interview room. The claimants’ union,
believing this was the way claimants were intimidated and cheated out of benefits, refused to be kept
out and would stage sit ins and occupations. When there was only one mouthy claimant, the SS
clers could just throw them out. However, with a large presence, the police would often be called
to eject them.99 Many issues of the claimants’ unions’ newspaper contain stories of police ejecting
unionists. Unwilling to let the intimidation of individual claimants stand, the claimants’ unions
contacted the National Council of Civil Liberties, the main civil liberty advocacy group in the UK
now called Liberty, who stated the SS cannot remove anyone from an interview or the office unless
other claimants object to their presence.100 Therefore, the claimants’ unions established that SS
offices are public spaces during business hours and that anyone has the right to be there so long as
they do not commit a criminal offence such as breach of the peace or causing a public nuisance.101

An additional way that claimants’ unions created solidarity and reduced shame was by
organizing collective trips to the SS office to claim. Everyone claiming together eliminated the
feelings of isolation that living on the dole could create while rising the consciousness of claimants

100 Claimants’ Newspaper no. 1 (Summer 1974), 3.
101 Claimants’ Newspaper no. 1 (Summer 1974), 3.
as a class. Moreover, the claimants could engage in civil disobedience by refusing to leave until everyone’s claims were reasonably dealt with. Just like squatters, claimants who occupied SS offices were committing the civil and not criminal offence of trespass. Moreover, just like the squatters, the claimants’ unions opposed the Criminal Trespass Act that would allow the police to intervene simply for refusing to leave. As things stood, the claimants’ unions advised that all claimants bring friends, children, and claimants’ unionists with them to the SS offices and force the payment of their entitlement. If the police were called, claimants were advised not to give them a reason to remove them by insisting they were filing a claim, had a right to be there, and the SS staff were in violation of the Ministry of Social Security Act 1966 by denying a rightful claim. Claimants’ unions advised suggesting the police arrest the SS staff.

The majority claimants’ unionist activities were attending appeals tribunals in an attempt to overturn decisions about claims. Due to discretionary powers of the SS staff, there were wide powers to approve or deny a claim based upon an individual clerk’s perception of an individual claimant. The ways in which public stigma and social class affected these discretionary powers has already been discussed. Additionally, according to the claimants’ unions, SS clerks and home visit officers could freely lie or produce irrelevant evidence for the purposes of denying claims if a claimant faced them alone. The Section 13 emergency payments were kept secret from claimants. Home visit officers, Special Investigators, and SS staff kept records of every claimant’s circumstances, relationships, and attitudes toward work and used that information to deny claims. On the side of the claimant was the right to appeal any decision made at a Social Security Appeals Tribunal. These tribunals were hardly independent or unbiased, prompting the claimants’ unions to focus much of their attention upon them.

The claimants’ unions would attend tribunals with a claimant as a “McKenzie Friend” to provide moral support, give advice, and take notes for the claimant. Beginning with the first claimants’ union in Birmingham, the strength of having union support at a tribunal meant most appealed decisions were overturned in the claimant’s favor. Most often appeals concerned discretionary payments; for example, a claim denied for extra heat being turned over when the claimant’s heating bill was produced at the tribunal. Other examples would be the non-payment of automatic benefits such as the “passport benefits” of the Family Income Supplement, which were paid upon appeal. As early as 1968, the Birmingham Claimants’ Union had a system of two union members attending a claimant’s appeal, one there to provide advice and representation and the other one there to take notes as well as learn the process. In late 1969, the DHSS tried to restrict access to appeals to only the claimant involved. As this was an affront to their tactic of never going alone, appellants who belonged to the claimants’ union adjourned their own tribunal until they were allowed representation. Claimants picketed the Birmingham Appeals Tribunal for six months, once again believing the necessity of collective action to supersede an individual’s claim. Eventually, claimants’ unions secured the right to attend appeals with a claimant, and in 1977 the right of all claimants to bring claimants’ unionists, family, friends, or any other witnesses or support was established.

Appealing claims decisions was one of the most important politicizing tools of the claimants’ unions. During the appeals process, claimants’ unionists were able to learn about and use the welfare state laws in ways that directly benefitted them. Often times, a claimant simply stating he or she was going to appeal with claimants’ union support was effective leverage against an SS clerk to overturn a denial. Appeals were also the place where a claimant could witness the full force of prejudice and

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hostility from those who controlled the welfare state against those who had to use it while also gaining a sense of political power and class-consciousness. Appealing a decision involved changing one’s mentality from resignation to accept whatever the state provided to demanding one’s rightful entitlements. Moreover, it was frequently argued that claiming full benefits for everyone who was entitled and appealing all denials would force the system to increase benefits and reduce denials and discretion (being the primary source of denied claims). Claimants’ unions explicitly regarded the welfare state as a tool to divide the working class and keep it subordinate to the middle and upper classes; they especially regarded denials of claims and the appeals tribunals as clear evidence of class-based prejudice against claimants. The claimants’ unions often complained the whole welfare state system was atomizing and isolating, and attending tribunals together, publicizing perceived injustices in newspapers and at meetings as well as picketing SS offices and tribunals were effective ways to counter and reimagine claiming benefits as a class-based plight.106

While insisting that the appeals tribunals were their ultimate politicizing weapon, the claimants’ unions appeared to keep a realistic perspective of what could actually be accomplished by appealing. The first appeal attended by members of the Birmingham Claimants’ Union, on 28 August 1969, was described as full of “gross bias and incompetence” as well as hostile to the claimant.107 Part of the hostility came from the generalized stigma toward claimants in public discourse and at the welfare office. Appeals tribunals were composed of three members, none of them claimants or even sympathetic parties. The chairman was appointed by the DHSS, the top of the pyramid against which any appeal would be lodged. The Trades Council and the Chamber of Commerce nominated the other two members.108 None of these tribunal members would have been claimants nor were they in anyway experts on the rules and policies which would affect the appeal.

106 Claimants Newspaper no. 4 (Spring 1975), 6.
108 Claimants Newspaper no. 4 (Spring 1975), 3.
Personal prejudices and hostility toward claimants went even further. For example, all information from interviews at the SS office would be available to tribunal members, including the claimant’s attitude toward work, personal life, work history, or social problems. This information served as a kind of “dog-whistle” about a claimant’s deservingness, which were kept secret from the claimant.\textsuperscript{109} Claimants’ unions’ newspapers reported on this bias as well as argued that the appeals tribunal would not even open the Ministry of Social Security Act, the DHSS guidebook, or other relevant sources of information when deciding a case. If most appeals were against decisions concerning discretionary payments that granted the SS clerk wide powers to deny, then the makeup of the appeals tribunal would seemingly ensure another round of denial based upon the prejudices of the tribunal. Adding to the frustration a claimant could experience was that appeal forms were not openly accessible at the SS office, one had to ask the clerk for it, and there was at least a four-week delay if the form itself was not “lost.” One reason appellants with claimants’ union support were successful was because they could produce witness statements from the interaction at the SS office and the union made it part of their job to know the ins and outs of the relevant laws. In Newton Abbot, the tribunal often expressed shock that the appellants could recite the laws and that they often took up far more than the usual fifteen minutes to present their case. In Newton Abbot, claimants’ union support appeals were successful in 70 percent of cases.\textsuperscript{110}

The factors against the claimant at the appeal went further than bias or incompetence, however. While an appeal could be lodged against any decision rejecting of a claim or the amount to be paid, the appeals tribunal had no authority to make benefits more generous or easier to obtain. A successful appeal often took the form of a claimant being granted less than the maximum amount of a benefit and then receiving the full amount upon appeal, but without backdating to the original

\textsuperscript{109} Claimants Newspaper no. 4 (Spring 1975), 3.
\textsuperscript{110} Jordan, 48.
claim. Alternatively, in the case of discretionary grants, an appellant would get benefits to which he or she was already entitled. The appeals process had no effect on the means tests either, so a claimant considered too well off could not argue against that. Lastly, the appeals tribunal did not operate under a system of precedence. An appeal won in one case had no bearing on the outcome of a similar case later. The tribunal members were not publicly named, claimants had no say in who they were, and it was likely that different members would be selected for each appeal. Because the appeals had no effect on the overall legislative framework of the DHSS, a successful appeal did not mean any SS office had to change their policy regarding granting payments. One long-standing but unsuccessful campaign of the claimants’ unions was to have a say on who sat on the tribunal, to empower the tribunal to affect changes in benefits rates, and for decisions to be reported in full and made public in an effort to establish precedence. Claimants’ unions were successful in establishing the right of appellants to bring representation and witnesses and for the DHSS to pay fares and legal expenses.111 Despite all these negative factors, the drive to use the appeals system was part of the claimants’ unions’ general campaign to get maximum benefits for its members as well as force the state to improve welfare services, in part by exposing the problems of the welfare state and by overwhelming the system with constant, mostly successful, appeals.

Conclusion

Deindustrialization and unemployment meant a drastic change in working-class consciousness and working-class activism during the late-1960s – 1980s. Global trends in capitalism meant many workers could expect periods of unemployment, casualization, insecurity, and stagnant or falling wages. All of these factors meant even those employed could expect to spend some time on the dole. Demographic changes over the same period meant more pensioners and single mother-headed households made claims on the welfare state, which could never adequately support them

111 Claimants’ Newspaper no. 1 (Summer 1974), 12.
and was now faced with reduced contributions from the working population. The claimants’ union movement was part of the response to these new and long-standing problems of the welfare state. Beginning with the premise that the welfare state was an entitlement that some people should receive without any restrictions, the claimants’ unions also demanded more access for more people and that the benefits must provide a decent level of livelihood for the modern world. This goal could not be achieved under capitalism, so the claimants’ unions engaged in a simultaneous campaign to overwhelm the welfare state by claiming full entitlements and demanding that the system be turned over to those who used it. They argued user control would ultimately necessitate the creation of a guaranteed adequate minimum income for all. Their ideals were radical and lofty. But they were also extensive in their analysis of late-capitalism by critiquing the labor movement’s call for a “right to work” as really a justification for forcing the poor into demeaning and low paid jobs while also arguing too much of capitalist production was devoted to the creation of useless or dangerous commodities.

With the casualization and deindustrialization of the working class, the traditional avenues to power and class consciousness were fundamentally eroded. Shop-floor and union militancy became less and less relevant as big industries disappeared and large numbers of workers became redundant. All the while, the trade unions and the Labour Party (perhaps unwittingly) divided the working class between those with jobs and those without. This further decreased the ability of the working class as a whole to maintain its strength and independence as a force to shape the economy and thus keep political power. The claimants’ union, through their efforts to raise and improve the livelihoods of those whose main income was state benefits, attempted to forge a different working-class identity that worked outside the wage-labor system. In this way, their struggle was radical instead of reformist, and they attempted collective direct action against the capitalist-controlled state to take over the system. When “user control” was established, their goal was to completely overturn the
system and re-create a welfare state that worked against capitalism’s need for unemployment and poverty while providing needs for everyone instead of subsidizing low wages.
Chapter III
Women’s Aid Refuges: The Fight against Abuse and Patriarchy

“Thrash me, crush me, beat me till I fall
I wanna be a victim for you all”
--X-Ray Specs, 1978

One spring afternoon in 1971, a group of about five hundred women and children along with one cow embarked on a protest march through a small English town. These women were upset by the call to end the 1946 Free Milk Act, proposed by Education Secretary Margaret Thatcher as part of a larger series of cuts proposed by the newly elected Conservative government. The women and children used the symbolism of the cow to express their disagreement with the cuts that would forever dub Thatcher as “Mrs. Milk-snatcher.” However, this single-issue demonstration ignited what would become a much wider challenge to women’s subordinate position in British society. Mothers, radical feminists, and Women’s Liberationists began talking to each other at recently created meeting places for them around London. The first goal of these meeting places was socialization. A woman’s role in the home often meant incredible isolation and alienation from her friends and other women. Therefore, the meeting places could simply be a place where women gathered together to have a cup of tea and share experiences, let the children play together, and take a respite from their normal daily activities.

Eventually, some women began recounting their lives of brutalization and domination by their husbands. In some cases, these were tales of years of abuse and of shame while keeping their suffering secret. Erin Pizzey was regularly at these meetings, and

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hearing stories of other women’s abuse recalled her own violent past. She watched her mother beaten at the hands of her father and later in life suffered abuse from her husband. Thinking that perhaps the momentum of the women’s movement and the solidarity created through the meeting places made this a good time to look for solutions, she contacted her local council. Hounslow council offered her a derelict house scheduled for demolition to be opened as a place where battered wives could find refuge, for a nominal annual rent. From this first house, the Women’s Aid Federation began opening the first refuges specifically for battered wives to escape their abusers and begin to rebuild their lives independently.

Over the next decade, Women’s Aid Federation became a well-organized, horizontal working-class movement that gave abused women protection. The Federation also added a working-class angle to the momentum of the women’s challenge to male-dominance in society. The immediate historical context of the development of the Women’s Aid Federation was second wave feminism, which sought to move beyond the gains of voting rights and further access to education and employment of the previous half century. Beginning in the 1960s, second-wave feminists began to challenge male dominance and discrimination in the realms of sexuality and reproductive rights. These feminists criticized de facto inequalities in school, work, and the home. Additionally important for this chapter, second-wave feminists objected to men’s hitherto accepted violence towards their wives and partners. The Women’s Aid Federation was important because it made a national issue out of what had been the private crisis of wife battery. Furthermore, it gave direct relief and support to women who needed to flee their violent partners when the police or welfare state could not protect them. Without these safe havens, all the laws and social welfare reforms instituted to equalize the position of women
vis-à-vis men did little to protect women who were in abusive relationships. Finally, the Women’s Aid Federation built upon the agitation of the wider women’s liberation movement by advocating for greater access to a more generous welfare system, equal pay, and more representation in positions of power. The Women’s Aid Federation engaged in a full-scale challenge to domestic violence as a key component to an overall ideology of patriarchy by tackling the acceptance of marital violence as well as women’s subordinate position in British society.

_A Refuge is Opened_

When a wife suffers violence, many outside observers criticize her for not simply leaving. This is especially true if she has children who might also be abused or witness her abuse. The reality for battered women was the reality faced by the squatters: the access to accommodation especially in places like London was incredibly difficult. Not until the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977, did the councils consider abused women a priority for emergency housing.\(^2\) Even with this provision, as we saw with other homeless Britons, the councils made many excuses not to provide accommodation because there simply was not enough to go around. Moreover, the so-called intentionality clause of the 1977 Act applied to battered women as well. Some housing authorities refused to rehouse battered women if their husbands agreed to take them back, regardless of what she wanted.\(^3\) The core reason was in the effort to provide social welfare for all, the British welfare state ended up creating a complex bureaucracy that sometimes caused more harm than good. As we saw in chapter one, a person who moved out of a flat that was too expensive or inadequate or moved out of a friend’s house without a formal eviction was declared

\(^2\) Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977 S. 1(2)(b)
\(^3\) Dobash and Dobash, 228.
intentionally homeless. In much the same way, the housing authorities expected abused women to go to court, file for a separation or divorce and then petition the court to turn over the tenancy to her. This was the purpose of the Domestic Violence and Matrimonial Proceedings Act 1976. If she simply left to escape her abuser, then she made herself intentionally homeless.

Prior to 1976, a council would advise a woman to file for an injunction against her husband and return to her home. Complicating the situation, a woman could only file for an injunction if she had already begun divorce proceedings. Moreover, the injunctions were basically worse than useless. Before 1976, the police could not arrest a man for violating an injunction. They had to arrest him for some other crime. In fact, studies show from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, police arrested men in domestic abuse situations most often for disturbing the peace or damaging property, not for physical assaults.\(^4\) Furthermore, if a man was going to physically assault and terrorize a woman, a court injunction was not going to stop him. In many cases, a woman would be expected to file an injunction against abuse but her abuser would not be ordered to leave the house. If he violated the injunction (i.e., beat her), then she would have to report it and wait several days before the courts would take action. Injunctions were not enforced by the police but by court-appointed bailiffs, who only worked nine to five Monday through Friday. In 1974, The Parliamentary Select Committee on Marital Violence stated that injunctions were “not worth the paper they were written on.”\(^5\) With the 1976 Domestic Violence and Matrimonial Proceedings Act, women no longer had to file for divorce before they could petition for an injunction. Also, an injunction could specify that the man had to leave the

\(^5\) Dobash and Dobash, 220.
premises enforced by arrest. This Act certainly gave the police more power to protect women, and the early 1980s saw the rise of protection orders and injunctions with the power to arrest. Likewise, the number of divorces with “unreasonable behavior” cited as the reason also rose in the 1980s.

Although the legal proscriptions could be frustratingly ineffective to protect women from their abusers, most abused women who came to refuges sought legal recourse. The effectiveness of injunctions or indeed separation and divorce was increased dramatically if the women could get away from their abusers. The most dramatic success of refuges was their ability to give an abused woman a safe and supportive space to make decisions about her well-being. The social agencies and police often demonstrated callousness about this truly human element. An abused woman who filed for divorce or a protection injunction but still had to live in the same house with her abuser would be subjected to his influence to drop the case or indeed face further abuse. If she had nowhere to go and no ability to support herself, then she was very unlikely to try to leave in the first place. The stories Pizzey relates of women staying with their abuser for decades speaks volumes to the difficult decisions to which their subordinate position subjected them. This cycle unfortunately continues: If she was abused, then she should leave. But, because she has no place to go, she stays. If she stays, then she wasn’t abused or it wasn’t that bad. If she stays, then she must like it. And so on.

This chapter deals with domestic violence, so it is worthwhile to ruminate briefly on those terms. Women’s Aid primarily served married women, but it also opened itself to all women who faced violence from their intimate partners. Therefore, while the terms

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7 Bourlet, 8-10.
“husband” and “wife” will be used throughout, in many cases this will also refer to men and women who lived together but were not legally married as well as women and men who were separated or divorced. The existence of an intimate relationship was key. This chapter follows the example of Women’s Aid, government, and academic studies that made no distinction between violence committed between married or unmarried couples. Further, although obviously men have been and continue to be the victims of domestic violence, the overwhelming majority of intimate partner violence has been committed by men against women, so that will be the focus of this chapter. Moreover, while homosexual relations and violence therein is not part of this chapter, domestic violence certainly existed in those relationships, and teasing out details historically is made more difficult because of the marginalization of their histories overall. This would be a rich topic for future research.

The term violence also bears some discussion. Assistant Chief Constable, South Wales Constabulary, Alan Bourlet writes in *Police Intervention in Marital Violence* that a generally accepted definition of violence includes slapping, kicking, punching, kneeing, shoving, striking with or throwing household objects, use of weapons, or any attempt to strangle or smother. 8 This chapter will generally agree with this definition while also being sympathetic to the damage caused to a person’s well-being through non-physical forms of assault. There are statutory levels of violence, cited below, but because of the limits of police action in cases of domestic violence, those definitions will be of minimal use. There was a wide expanse of violence from the relatively minor face slap to pouring boiling water over a woman’s head, kicking her, or maiming her to death. Many women who reported domestic abuse did so after years of trying to hide permanent injuries such as hair loss,

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8 Bourlet, 1.
improperly healed bones, scars, and other disfigurements as well as the psychological trauma resulting from the physical violence.

In writing about marital violence, sociologists Dobash and Dobash make an important point about the relationship dynamics involved. They argue we cannot separate violent episodes from the relationship as a whole because they often happened in the context of regular day-to-day activities of the couple. An occurrence of violence may happen in the context of longer periods of verbal or other kinds of abuse. While drinking was never cited as a causal factor in Dobash and Dobash’s study, over 80 percent of the women they interviewed reported the violence happened most often on Friday or Saturday nights between 10 p.m. and 12 a.m.—prime pub closing times, so alcohol has to be considered at least a corollary. Violent events were considered historically as just “clearing the air” of an otherwise tense relationship. However, Dobash and Dobash also state it is impossible to understand everything about a relationship that goes into the violence. The causes of marital violence range from sexual jealousy to problems with the children, but the predominant immediate reasons for most violent events were sexual jealousy, expectations about housework, and money. These reasons documented by Dobash and Dobash in the 1970s in Glasgow strongly echo the reasons for marital violence in the nineteenth century recorded by Hammerton. Therefore, indeed, the violence happened at the point of gender oppression and economic insecurity. The kinds of violence most often

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10 Dobash and Dobash, Appendix B, Table 6, 247.
reported by women were punches to the face and body followed by slaps and pushes, but other forms of violence such as hitting with an object were also common.12

After the violent event, Dobash and Dobash found 90 percent of women stayed at home and did not report the violence to anyone at all. Other studies found women left home immediately, often to stay with friends or relatives for a while. As will be shown, women had few options as far as where she could seek help. Doubling up with friends or relatives fed into the housing crisis and potential eviction described in chapter one. Additionally, deciding to leave permanently nearly ensured a woman’s destitution and her children being taken into care because the job market and welfare system were both geared toward her dependence on a husband (see below). Given this reality, it is small wonder that social workers, the police, doctors, and clergy all typically advised a woman to stay put and try to work things out with her abuser.

The Chiswick Women’s Aid refuge was opened as a way to address this problem. It was born out of the movement of women coming together for socializing and to support each other through the isolation of being housewives. In 1971, Erin Pizzey petitioned the Borough of Hounslow to open a house where women could stay to escape abuse and possibly file for injunctions or divorce. The council gave her a house at 2 Belmont Terrace; a derelict old house due to be demolished. Many of the other houses in the area were also slated for the wrecking ball but were being used as temporary housing by the council and squatters. A local bank provided a loan and a local builder took on the job of making 2 Belmont Terrace a livable home.13 Many women from the area showed up to help and within a year, an average of thirty-four women and children lived there at any one time (in

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12 Dobash and Dobash, Appendix B, Table 7, 248.
the four-bedroomed terrace house). Sometimes, the number could be up to 130.\textsuperscript{14} Word spread through newspaper advertisements and television spots that Chiswick Women’s Aid was open to help battered wives escape their abuse. The refuge maintained a policy that no woman would ever be turned away, no matter the overcrowding, no matter the lack of resources or amenities. The sheer numbers and the willingness of women to endure appalling conditions at the shelter spoke to the extent and severity of the problem of marital abuse. By 1979, there were 100 groups in the National Women’s Aid Federation with 150 refuges in England and Wales (Scotland had a further 30 groups with 20 refuges).\textsuperscript{15} Women’s Aid also operated in Northern Ireland. The distrust between abused women and the police discussed below would be only further entrenched with the volatile sectarian strife in that region. In 1979, Women’s Aid became an official charity and renamed Refuge, which still operates today.

One woman to find peace in Chiswick was Jenny Smith. Originally, from a small mining village near Chesterfield, Jenny ran away to London early in life and quickly fell in love with Lenny, a Guyanese immigrant, and they took up home in a small bedsit in Stoke Newington. Facing unemployment, the Kray gang, and constant harassment for being an interracial couple, Jenny and Lenny developed an isolated co-dependency; as Jenny later recalled, “it was just me and Lenny against the world.”\textsuperscript{16} Unfortunately, Lenny developed what was most probably paranoid schizophrenia and joined a cult, which culminated in his belief that Jenny was the devil who needed to be cleansed though beating and burning. Jenny endured four years of abuse, including being raped and forced to marry Lenny.

\textsuperscript{14} Pizzey, 44.
\textsuperscript{20} Dobash and Dobash, 223-4.
Jenny’s appeals to police for protection were ignored. She was, like many women at the
time, advised to go back to Lenny and try to make their relationship work. She went to her
doctor for advice who advised her to see a psychiatrist.

Into the 1970s, it was not uncommon for abused wives to be treated as if not wanting to be beaten was a mental illness, and Jenny was no different. Chiswick handled many cases of women who were admitted to a mental hospital for depression or attempted suicide. Jenny was similar to other women who were committed after they overdosed on prescription or other drugs. Looking at the medicalization of daily life in the decades after the Second World War reveals valium or other tranquilizers (such as Meprobamate the drug referenced in the Rolling Stones’ “Mother’s Little Helper”) being specifically targeted at women deemed unable to cope with being a housewife, including enduring an abusive husband.17 The fact that “mother’s little helper” was both a common reference to tranquilizers and a hit pop song speaks to the cultural acceptance of the fact that some housewives were distressed and the best solution was psychotropic drugs. Often, the staff and doctors knew she was beaten, but she was conveniently labeled “cured” after a couple of weeks on tranquilizers. A significant problem with the mental health treatment of abused wives was the fact that most doctors and psychiatrists were men and, at least subconsciously, upheld a male-dominance standard of normalcy. During the 1970s, the medical profession, including psychiatry, was coming to the agreement that violence cannot be characterized as a mental illness. However, at the same time, popular beliefs held that perpetrators and victims of domestic violence were mentally ill, deprived, or inadequate, so personal pathology explained marital abuse.18

17 Esther Inglis-Arkell. "This Is The Drug In The Rolling Stones' Song ‘Mother's Little Helper,’" Io9.gizmodo.com
18 Dobash and Dobash, 193.
Psychoanalytic ideology concerns itself with defining and explaining socially normal behavior. In regarding relationships between men and women, the inherently patriarchal nature of society necessarily influences that definition. It was “normal” for the man to be dominant, and it was “normal” for the woman to be submissive and obedient. The “abnormality” of a wife who deviated from this standard was the cause of friction that caused violence. Psycho-social theorists in the 1970s presented a unified discourse about women as mothers and wives as the primary cause of interpersonal violence. For example, Leon Saul in 1972 argued that all violence from war to domestic abuse stemmed from within the individual and the source of this violence was emotional hostility and hate developed during childhood by the kind of parenting received. Because women were considered wholly responsible for child rearing, this theory quite clearly blamed mothers for their violent sons-turned-violent-husbands. Leroy Schultz analyzed husbands who tried to murder their wives in the United States and argued that the victims in spousal abuse cases were always partly to blame, feeding into a widespread belief that “provocative” wives caused their own assaults. Furthermore, Schultz found that all the men he interviewed had domineering and rejecting mothers and regarded their wives in the same way. Therefore, Schultz managed to blame women two-fold for wife battery. A domineering mother made a man submissive and abnormal toward women; it was the wife’s “abnormality” of being domineering that provoked a violent response from the husband. The victim-blaming tendency in the medical, psychoanalytical, judicial, and other fields in the helping professions created a situation where outside actors were extremely reluctant to intervene in a marital abuse situation. This tendency was one in which the

primary course of action was to convince the wife that the violence was her fault and thus up to her personally to resolve the situation by being more attentive to her “normal” position in the marriage.

It would be impossible to explain all the different aspects of marital violence in all marriages. Nonetheless, certain patterns appear repeatedly in interviews, reports, and memoirs. Arguments over the husband’s authority in the daily running of the household and the relationship itself often appear in stories of abuse. For example, although it would be considered uncommon for a man to take charge of cleaning and childcare in the 1970s, it would not be uncommon for him to assume authority over those tasks. Similarly, the amount of contact with members of the opposite sex and issues of jealousy took on a double standard in which the husband assumed and was assumed to have the ultimate authority. One abused woman spoke of not being able “to go anywhere, speak to anyone. I mean, even if I spoke to anyone, even with his brothers, you know, he was jealous.”

However, her concern over her husband’s interactions with other women, even in the case of actual infidelity, was viewed as inappropriate restrictions on his authority. One couple had an argument about another woman, and the husband responded with punches and kicks that left her with black eyes, broken ribs, and bruises all over. Another woman interviewed by Dobash and Dobash reported confronting her husband walking out of the pub with another woman that quickly escalated into him beating her. These two examples represent a much larger pattern in which men’s and women’s personal autonomy were unequal. There was also an underlying factor of women coming to accept that they should have no right to object to a man exercising his freedom from family life or having total

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20 Dobash and Dobash, 131.
21 Bourlet, 2.
freedom within the marriage. This double standard stemmed directly from the segregated lived experiences of working-class couples that developed due to industrial work and urbanization over the course of the nineteenth century analyzed by McKibbin.22

A wife who failed to maintain the household or raise the children to her husband’s standards or interfered with his freedom or contact with other women, was widely regarding as “provoking” a violent response. A “nagging” wife was also considered out of line, and a violent chastisement from the husband was seen as justified. Abusive husbands expressed this idea and were supported by the police, courts, doctors, and other parts of society. Anthony Storr argues in his 1974 book *Human Aggression*:

>The nagging, aggressive woman is often unconsciously demanding that which she most fears. By irritating a man, making unreasonably [sic] demands and criticizing, she is really trying to evoke a dominant response by attacking him for his lack of virility. Her aggression is fulfilling a double purpose, both protecting against male dominance and, at the same time, demanding it.23

The social discourse about marital violence followed similar lines. The idea that women wanted or needed male violence permeates several reports.

Jenny’s psychiatrist ordered her to undergo electroconvulsive treatment (ECT), which she did, having no idea what that was or what would be the result. She left the office in the fog of just having her brain electrocuted, and resolved never to go to her GP or psychiatrist for help about her abuse again; all they did was give her pills and “fry my brain!”24 She later found out she was pregnant, again. Jenny’s last hope was maybe by having her children christened in the Church of England, the church would help her escape her abusive situation. When one night she escaped from Lenny’s abuse, Jenny asked

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24 Smith, 130.
the vicar with blood dripping off her face to help her. He replied, “Go home, child, and make your peace.”

25 Now feeling utterly helpless and abandoned by all those who should help her, Jenny resigned herself to never finding relief from her abuse.

However, one day in 1973 while buying milk from a corner shop, she saw an ad in the *Daily Mirror*: “Victim of domestic violence? Need help?” It was a tiny advertisement for Chiswick house with a telephone number. Jenny persuaded the store clerk to let her use a phone and called. After learning its location at 2 Belmont Terrace, Jenny asked her neighbor to call a taxi, and then she was off with her two daughters.

Jenny, like hundreds of other women, arrived at Chiswick House with little other than grinding pain and fear for the future. Erin Pizzey and her second in command, Anne Ashby, ran Chiswick along lines of mutual support and understanding by women for women. Erin’s first words to Jenny were “you are amongst people who understand,” and indeed Jenny, like many others had been denied that for so long the relief itself was immense. 26 The house was meant to be run by its inhabitants, but no one was pressured to take part in any activities, from cleaning to group therapy, until they were ready. Jenny recalls taking about two weeks of feeling like life was blurry, fuzzy, unreal before she could fully appreciate that she was safe from Lenny and surrounded by other women and children. 27 Erin Pizzey relates, “battered women are almost permanently in a shocked state. The constant fear of beating leaves them very tense and nervous. Some can’t eat, others sleep little.” 28 Everyone was allowed to come to a sense of security and ability before they were expected to contribute to the household. Then, they followed a cleaning rota and rules such as no drink, no violence, and no boyfriends or husbands. All the women had

25 Smith, 165.
26 Smith, 174.
27 Smith, 177.
28 Pizzey, 41.
the right to vote someone out of the house, including the paid staff. These communal lines would
be recognizable in many squats of the period because Chiswick and other early refuges essentially
functioned in similar ways.

The first thing Jenny noticed, and viewers of Thames Television’s documentary would
have noticed, was the utter dilapidation of the house, and that there were women and children
everywhere. Not a space of the walls lacked peeling paint. Women and children occupied every
available space on the floor, the steps, or chairs. Jenny was given six feet of floor space with a
mattress and a single sheet in a bedroom overflowing with other women on mattresses. Chiswick
had four bedrooms, a tiny back garden, and an outdoor toilet with no bathroom. The stench of
unwashed bodies and dirty nappies, women and children so long-traumatized that they were
unable to care for themselves, and rats and other vermin are mentioned along with the gratitude
for safety in memoirs and interviews. Chiswick was in many ways a refugee camp, and its
appearance confirmed it as such. Hounslow council seemed willing to look the other way for the
overcrowding and lack of hygiene. This must have been in part because Belmont Terrace was
scheduled for demolition. It was also highly likely that the council felt they had done enough by
providing a dilapidated house for a refuge as a solution to the problem of wife beating. The
parallels with the housing crisis discussed in chapter one strongly indicate this was the case.

The women and children were willing to endure the crowded and dirty conditions mainly
due to the alternative of the fear and violence in their marital homes. However, Erin Pizzey was
always looking for better conditions for the women she took into the refuge. One problem was
many of the women living at 2 Belmont Terrace were not residents of Hounslow Borough, so the
council had no responsibility to rehouse them. Many conflicts between later refuges and the
councils in which they were located would arise over this issue of residency. But Chiswick

29 Pizzey, 43; Smith 179.
preserved, led by Pizzey who turned down an offer by Hounslow to take over the refuge and continued to rally the women in the refuge to seek better accommodations as well as support. Erin Pizzey was able to secure funding from the Department of Health and Social Security, a feat in itself (see below), to find a new house for a refuge. In early summer of 1973, a man called Neville Vincent sent a letter to Chiswick House. He had experience with buying property and enlisted the board of directors of the construction firm Bovis to help the women of Chiswick House find and secure better accommodations. Eventually, they found 369 Chiswick High Road, just around the corner from 2 Belmont Terrace. This new house had larger rooms, a bigger garden, and a large, full basement that could be turned into a playgroup space and play rooms for the children. When describing the new house to the women, Erin Pizzey enthused “it’s got three indoor toilets too.”

There was no hot water and it was completely derelict, yet the new house filled up almost as soon as its doors opened. Although licensed for thirty-six people, there were more often up to 130 women and children living there.

After Chiswick established itself in west London, other refuges opened following its basic model. First in other parts of London, then up and down the United Kingdom from places like Brighton, to Manchester, to Edinburgh. The Women’s Aid Centers began to establish themselves as a national body. The first Conference of the National Women’s Aid Federation was held in Manchester in April 1975. The conference adopted the proposal that the Women’s Aid Federation would establish a democratic organization representing regional and local centers and refuges across the country. The basic principles of Women’s Aid were that they were primarily self-help organizations. Out of the National Conference in 1975, the Women’s Aid Federation adopted six guiding principles of the organization. These were:

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30 Smith, 187; Pizzey, 44.
31 Smith, 187.
1. To provide temporary refuge for women who have suffered mental or physical harassment and their children on request.
2. To encourage the women to determine their own future and to help them achieve it, whether this involves returning home or starting a new life elsewhere.
3. To recognize and care for the emotional and educational needs of the children involved.
4. To offer support, advice, and help to any woman who asks for it, whether or not she is a resident, and also to offer support and aftercare to any women and children who have left the refuge.
5. To educate and inform the public, the media, the police, the courts, the social services, and other authorities with respect to the battering of women, mindful of the fact that this is a result of the general position of women in society.\(^\text{32}\)

This women-focused policy worked alongside paid professionals and volunteers when appropriate; for example, Chiswick house was able to secure funds to pay repairmen and playgroup leaders. However, the women living in each refuge agreed to mutual support and collective decision-making and household responsibilities.\(^\text{33}\) Erin Pizzey argues that Women’s Aid forced women out of their isolation, in part due to the overcrowding and the presence of so many people who have suffered trauma. Communication and working together became necessary.\(^\text{34}\) The national federation adopted this insistence on mutual self-help to combat the long-established concept of women’s passivity, helplessness, and thus “natural” victimhood by men and society more generally. Dobash and Dobash point to women’s inferior position and supposed inferior intellect as prime contributing factors to her being the “appropriate victim.” Therefore, the Women’s Aid Federation in conjunction with the larger women’s movement actively promoted self-help and women’s mutual aid as a counter measure.

Beginning with a 1975 court summons related to overcrowding (and it seems Chiswick’s refusal to turn over control to the council), Pizzey and Smith began an active, public campaign to raise awareness of battered wives and advocate for more refuges. Publicity from Pizzey’s book and

\(^{32}\) National Women’s Aid Federation, “Aims and Objectives,” Minutes of a Delegates’ Conference Held in Manchester on 1\(^\text{st}\) March 1975, 1-2.

\(^{33}\) Women’s Aid Federation Newsletter, ca. 1976.

\(^{34}\) Pizzey, 45.
the Thames Television documentary “broke the habit of secrecy that kept battered women from leaving home and seeking help,” according to renown lesbian feminist activist Del Martin. The Chiswick model of refuges began to open in the United States and Europe in the early 1970s. In addition, the women themselves were spurred into activism that many of them might not have considered possible before. Jenny Smith speaks of having “found her voice” when in response to threats to shut down Chiswick, she and the other women all agreed to fight to keep it open with the open-door policy. Women from Women’s Aid began regular pickets of 10 Downing Street in 1975, holding placards declaring “Battered Women Need a Refuge.” Smith began giving public talks shortly thereafter, her first one in support of the open-door policy:

When you open a door and there’s a woman there in the state that you know what it’s like to be in, are you going to close the door because it’s too crowded? Are you hell! You’re going to put another mattress down and welcome her and her children in…You give her a big hug, make her feel welcome and safe.

Smith later gave a speech to a group for violent men as a way to show them the effects of their actions. She hated the experience and vowed to never do so again, seeing the men there as violent bullies. However, Pizzey was more sympathetic, seeing the violence in adult men as part of a generational inheritance. This chapter cannot attempt to answer the psychological and sociological questions of how witnessing or experiencing abuse can lead to one becoming an abuser, but it is worthwhile to understand that even within this fraction of the women’s movement, how men become violent and how to address that on a broad scale was actively debated.

The need for battered women’s refuges united the Women’s Aid Federation. Hounslow Council continued to threaten eviction due to overcrowding and the fact that some women housed in the refuge were not from the borough. Pizzey, Smith, and others continued their

36 Smith, 236.
37 Smith, 238.
campaign to keep it open, gaining support from many quarters, including The Who.\footnote{Smith, 241.} Pizzey was able to secure a £2,000 per month grant from DHSS and a £10,000 Urban Aid Grant from Hounslow Council, but she refused to comply with any regulations imposed.\footnote{Smith, 254.} This sparked the ire of many, including women in other refuges. A division very similar to the one that plagued the licenced and unlicensed squatters developed in Women’s Aid. Criticism was flung one way or the other about using governmental funds and obeying the regulations therefrom. Pizzey and Smith toured Europe to gain support outside the UK. While in Europe, Hounslow went through with its efforts to evict. Erin Pizzey inspired a full-scale resistance that was reported in the press from the time they got back to London on 2 April until the scheduled eviction date, 20 April. “Battered Women Fight for a Permanent Home” was an *Evening Standard* headline. Meanwhile, Jenny Smith wrote an appeal to newly elected Prime Minister James Callaghan. As the date approached, tensions rose. Residents of Chiswick promised to barricade themselves against eviction in the tried and true squatter tactic. But on 20 April, Smith and the others received a letter from Hounslow informing them that Hackney agreed to give them all permanent housing, and that the Greater London Council would now agree to rehouse battered women away from the boroughs they fled. “Victory!” is how Jenny Smith describes the turn of events. In fact, this moment was a challenge to hitherto policies of councils denying they had to house those without homes if they were from another borough. The 1977 Housing (Homeless Persons) Act gave battered women access to emergency housing if she fled violence, but it wasn’t until the 1996 Housing Act that boroughs were required to house battered women regardless of where they came from.

All while this eviction battle played out in Hounslow Council, the Women’s Aid Federation was developing as a national movement. The National Federation was organized

\footnote{Smith, 241.} \footnote{Smith, 254.}
democratically with nine regions plus Scotland (separate because of different legal and financial realities). Each region would hold regular meetings and elect representatives to the national body. A national coordinator would be elected from existing groups and would receive a salary from the Department of Health and Social Security. Jo Sutton, who helped establish Chiswick, was proposed to be the first national coordinator, but due to opposition from Chiswick and others, she instead worked to negotiate the position and its salary with the DHSS over 1975. Each region would also elect a regional coordinator. Although the National Federation had certain powers, each local center and refuge maintained their autonomy and were responsible for their daily actions. Local centers received no financial support from the National Body. A proposal began in 1975 to turn the National Federation into a charity, which was not finally accepted until 1979. Part of the reason this status took so long to reach was from opposition from Erin Pizzey who did not want the autonomy and effectiveness of the refuges compromised by governmental oversight and restrictions. Pizzey’s fiery personal style and absolute refusal to compromise over the open-door policy kept her in court for many years, and caused some others slowly to drift away from her. While they began with similar motivations and goals, a clear break between the National Women’s Aid Federation and Erin Pizzey and others followed the 1975 Conference. In a similar way as the division among squatters, some in the battered women’s refuge movement considered cooperation with the government to be antithetical to their overall philosophy while others saw it as the most pragmatic solution to the problem. This division aligns with the debates discussed so far within squatting and claimants’ movements.

40 National Women’s Aid Federation, “Resolutions Which Were Made by the Second National Women’s Aid Conference on February 2nd 1975,” 1 and 3.
**Historical Context**

Wife-beating and other forms of physical coercion of women by men has a long history. The idea that a man may use physical chastisement to control his wife goes back at least as far as the mythical founding of Rome by Romulus when he proclaimed the first marriage law in 753 BCE. According to authors Julia O’Faolain and Lauro Martines, “[t]his law obligated the married woman, as having no other refuge, to conform themselves entirely to the temper of their husbands and the husbands to rule their wives as necessary and inseparable possessions.” Sociologists Dobash and Dobash posit that abuse of married wives come from the Greco-Roman as well as Judeo-Christian legal and cultural legacies in the west. Women were constructed as the “appropriate victims” of abuse due to their subordination. The social construction of women often directly presupposed their inferior intellect and inability to act responsibly while men, especially as fathers and husbands, were expected and empowered to control them, with violence if necessary.

The nature of domestic violence in the mid-twentieth century developed, in large part, from the pattern of marriage established during the Victorian era. The oft-rehearsed concept of “separate spheres” contributed to the alienation between husbands and wives that could lead to very violent confrontations within the home. Although genuinely “separate spheres” were in the main a product of middle-class imaginings, this filtered through to working-class marriages in significant ways. In the nineteenth century, working-class men and women began marrying in increasing numbers and at younger ages compared to others in society. These were ideally romantic marriages, but pragmatic considerations were the foundation of many relationships. Wives looked for “good

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42 Dobash and Dobash, 31-47.
providers” who had steady work and mostly kept out of the way around the house. Husbands sought “good housemakers” who did not nag or gossip, were modest in all aspects, and who generally submitted to him. Moreover, men and women judged a marriage to be successful differently. Men would speak about the “docility” and “chastity” of their wives. There was an emphasis upon her being a virgin when they married and remaining faithful to him throughout. Historian Ross McKibbin cites the primacy of sexual power and possession in the way husbands described their wives, and confrontations over infidelity, jealousy, or questionable paternity of children could become violent—often with social acceptance. Wives on the other hand often speak of their “good husbands” as helping around the house (while submitting to her domestic authority), loving the children, and not being too drunk or too violent too often. Many women expressed gratitude for a husband who did not try to initiate sex too often (understandable given the lack of reliable birth control among other factors).

Beyond the different desires and expectations of men and women in working-class marriages, there developed truly segregated life experiences over the course of the nineteenth century. This was especially true in the North and large cities. Working-class women stayed home most of the time and ran the home. They did not visit their husbands at work, especially in dirty and dangerous factories or mines, and rarely had a clear concept of what their husbands did. Husbands, meanwhile, often preferred not to talk about work with their wives and families. A near ritual of taking off and keeping off the artifacts of work—boots, cloth hat, braces, etc.—as soon as returning home for the day was common. The different worlds of men and women became more pronounced with more

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44 McKibbin, 165.
45 McKibbin, 166
industrialization as well as slum clearances and urban renewal. A. James Hammerton begins his study of violent marriages with a discussion of the “breakdown of village culture” due to industrialization and urbanization. Moreover, the rise of waged labor in factories and social and moral prescriptions on behavior all put further pressure upon working-class families that could lead to domestic violence. The separation of husbands and wives, conflict over finances, and subtler threats to male authority such as increased literacy among women created a domestic battleground, and the form of conflict that left the most records was domestic violence.

Over the nineteenth century, violence in English streets became largely unacceptable. We can see this with the creation of a professional police force to keep the Queen’s Peace. In addition, violence was no longer considered appropriate within the home, at least rhetorically. Hammerton cites “rough music” rituals against wife beaters gaining popularity in the late nineteenth century, marking a shift from these rituals targeting violent or nagging women to targeting violent husbands. Also apparent was that the public intolerance did little to stem the violence of men toward women in the home. An example of this is the interesting folk custom in Essex, “the Dunnow Flitch.” A couple would swear an oath that their marriage was free from violence or conflict, and the county would reward them with a large side of bacon. Successful applicants were rare. Additionally, the famous Punch and Judy puppet shows were immensely popular throughout the nineteenth century with each show more or less one long, deadly domestic row in puppet form. While “rough music” began to turn its attention to violent husbands, there

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46 Hammerton, 13.
47 Hammerton, 14.
48 Hammerton, 15-17.
49 Hammerton, 19.
were still cases of wives being charivari for disobeying their husbands or seeking legal redress when he beat her. In studies of the nineteenth century, it often appeared that attempts to solve a domestic violence situation had the effect of further marginalizing and isolating women into the domestic sphere. This made them more vulnerable to violent husbands. The main intervention of the Women’s Aid Movement that went beyond social proscription or legal condemnation was the concrete provision of a safe haven away from the violent domestic situation.

A complicated dance of domestic control could be the catalyst for domestic violence, beginning in the nineteenth century and seen all the through to the late twentieth (and beyond). While both husbands and wives agreed the home was the wife’s sphere and it was up to her to keep the home maintained, shop for food and necessaries and care for the children, for the most part, she had to do this with her husband’s pay packet. In most marriages, the husband would give over part of his pay to his wife directly in order to procure these items. Even under the ideology of coverture, some women had their own money, through work or inheritance, and they would be able to keep that as “pin money” to be used for household expenses. In any case, most husbands preferred not to get involved in running the household, and most wives sought the same.

As idealized “companionate” marriages became more common, many couples would share in a kind of give and take in which all were happy with the domestic sphere. However, with the breadwinner model, the husband held the primary finances and was socially and legally empowered to spend his money how he saw fit. Further, it was considered his right to correct his wife if she did not meet his household expectations. If a husband decided to spend his money at the pubs or tracks, for example, he would still expect food, cleanliness, and comfort at home. When the household upkeep began sliding
as a result, this could lead to rows that with the presence of drink and/or sexual jealousy could become violent. Middle class commentary in such places as *The Times* even expressed sanction of wife beating if the wife failed to uphold respectable standards of morality or domesticity.\(^{50}\) Throughout the period from the nineteenth century to the 1980s, arguments over finances—with the husband upset that his wife did not keep the house well enough, while she would complain of having no money because he spent it all on drink, leisure, or even other women—were common elements in a violent marriage.

Physical violence against women as wives was not only a means to brutalize and oppress them, but it was also an explicit demonstration of their subordination in patriarchal society. Historically, the legal, political, economic, and ideological realms have supported a husband’s authority over his wife and approved of his use of physical force against her. According to Dobash and Dobash, although men could no longer beat their wives with impunity, the legacy of patriarchy created conditions in the relationship that encouraged physical abuse. The continued moral order that reinforced the subordination of wives to husbands made it difficult for her to oppose his domination, or any other domination, because her struggle was considered “wrong, immoral, and a violation of the respect and loyalty a wife is supposed to give her husband.”\(^{51}\) Therefore, women struggled against all odds: cultural ideals that expected women to submit to and obey whatever her husband dealt out to her and social agencies or policies that demonstrated direct or indirect support for the husband’s authority and his use of violence.

The class dimension of domestic violence presents problems for research. On the one hand, today many observers accept that domestic violence is as common among the

\(^{50}\) Hammerton, 27.

\(^{51}\) Dobash and Dobash, xi.
poor as it is the rich; however, from the mid-nineteenth century until the late twentieth, wife beating was primarily located in the poorest sections of the working-class in the public mind. John Stuart Mill described working-class male violence against women as conditioned by a capitalist social order in which the only person lower than a laborer was his “domestic slave” (his wife) who became the target of his frustrations born out of his own exploitation.\textsuperscript{52} This idea has remained in much anti-capitalist rhetoric, and certainly must hold some truth. Frances Power Cobbe, whose agitation led to greater legal protection for wives in the 1880s, also contended it was in the miserable slums of factory districts or mining towns where men were hard and brutal that most cases of domestic violence happened. She also expressed regret that the lowest workers were so culturally ingrained to violence that the law probably could not control them.\textsuperscript{53} Cobbe along with reformers like J.W. Kaye characterized domestic violence as being most prevalent in the poorest districts that were home to the poorest members of the working class. More concretely, Hammerton cites the “imperfect and arbitrary… but best available” sources (i.e., court cases) that show a majority of domestic violence cases between 1836 and 1913 involved members of “respectable” working class and even lower middle class men.\textsuperscript{54}

The press, social reformers, and Parliament tended to focus on the “kicking districts” of places like Lancashire or Liverpool where many women died after being kicked to death by their husbands wearing their heavy work boots. This was part of an overall intervention in the lives of the working poor by middle class reformers. As upwardly mobile workers and traditional artisans began to regard wife beating as “rough” and not “respectable,” there was a decline in reported incidents and cases of domestic violence.

\textsuperscript{52} Hammerton, 38.  
\textsuperscript{54} Hammerton 37.
violence. Nancy Tomes and other historians point to a genuine decline as wife beating became defined as unmanly while violence generally became less acceptable. On the reverse of this trend, as violence became less acceptable, so too did it become less likely that violence would be reported. Working class women who reported the violence of their husbands brought the stigma of their neighbors either upon him as “rough” or upon her as disloyal. It seems both scenarios were common. Additionally, with urbanization and the further retreat of working-class people from public to private lives, domestic violence was removed from the surveillance of neighbors and the state; this would be especially true of working-class families resentful of unwanted middle-class interventions into their private lives. The breadwinner model of male working-class wages meant increased economic dependence of wives upon their husbands, making reporting abuse even less likely. The decision of the British government to reinforce the male breadwinner model with the post-World War Two welfare state continued the dependence—and vulnerability—of women in marriage. None of this is to suggest marital violence was somehow confined to the working class or that middle class women were less victimized. However, the class-based experience of accessing the welfare state, dependence, and the legacy of socio-cultural intervention in working-class women’s lives was especially relevant to the work of Women’s Aid that is the focus of this chapter.

In the one hundred years prior to the election of Britain’s first female prime minister, only two major public outcries against wife battery happened. The first was in 1878, when Frances Power Cobbe published an essay entitled “Wife Torture in England.”

55 Nancy Tomes, “A ‘Torrent of Abuse’: Crimes of Violence between Working-Class Men and Women in London,” *Journal of Social History* 11, no. 3 (1978): 328-345. The unacceptability of violence in this period generally refers to within the British Isles. The exportation of violence to Ireland or the Empire are obvious exceptions to this trend.
56 Hammerton, 39.
She examined the “kicking districts” of Liverpool, places with high annual numbers of wives kicked or maimed to death by their husbands in working-class neighborhoods. This essay created such an outcry that Parliament eventually passed the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1878. This Act for the first time gave women legal separations with maintenance from their husbands, but only if he was first convicted of aggravated assault.\(^{57}\) Afterwards, wife beating went on largely as before and elicited little attention outside of those who were directly involved.

The second general public outcry happened in 1971 when Erin Pizzey published her book *Scream Quietly or the Neighbours Will Hear*, which was later turned into a Thames Television documentary of the same name. This book discusses the early life of the Chiswick Women’s Aid refuge examined above. It gave disturbing details of several women’s reality of abuse and escape while also criticizing patriarchy as the fundamental cause of wife battery.\(^{58}\) Erin Pizzey discussed abuse as a problem for all kinds of people. She describes young wives and grandmothers entering her refuge as well as the damaging effects witnessing abuse can have on children, especially young boys. Pizzey relates a few stories of middle class or “posh” women coming to the refuge, but the majority seem to have working class husbands or have been reliant of welfare benefits prior to leaving their homes. This publication sparked the setting up of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Violence in Marriage in 1974. A growing feminist and women’s movement further pressured the government to act. Women flocked to the Women’s Aid refuges, speaking to the great desire for this previously unmet need. Their presence made marital violence more publicly noticed. A link in the public mind developed between marital violence and non-


\(^{58}\) See Pizzey.
accidental injury of children in the early 1970s as issues in which the government should be involved.\textsuperscript{59}

In 1971, public and political discourse did not recognize battered wives as a social problem. Although violence in marriage was well-known and least implicitly accepted if not outright abetted, the public and the law tended to ignore it as long as it stayed in the home. In 1935, Bertrand Russell wrote “Rights a Husband Once Had,” in which he argued that the Matrimonial Causes Act 1878, the Representation of the People Acts 1918 and 1928,\textsuperscript{60} and the increased presence of women in the workplace had all combined to resolve the problem of marital violence.\textsuperscript{61} He argued that although husbands lost their traditional rights to control violently their wives, women were still typically economically dependent on marriage and therefore unequal. This was a weak point for Russell because he failed to recognize that women’s economic and cultural subordination to men meant that although men’s right to beat their wives was no longer legally allowed, if he chose to so do, there was little the wife could do in response. According to Dobash and Dobash, Russell also failed to recognize that plenty of husbands still beat their wives and most people simply accepted this as a matter of course.\textsuperscript{62}

Wife beating nearly always occurs in the home, and this contributes to the lack of public discussion about it. Most people believed, at least until the 1970s when the issue was pushed into the public eye, that the sanctity of marriage and the right to privacy in one’s home meant husbands could beat their wives and that any outside interference was illegitimate. A husband was culturally and legally empowered to manage his wife’s behavior

\textsuperscript{59} Borkowski, et al., 4.
\textsuperscript{60} The 1918 Act gave all men and all women over 30 the right to vote. The 1928 Act gave all men and women over 21 equal enfranchisement.
\textsuperscript{61} Dobash and Dobash, 5.
\textsuperscript{62} Dobash and Dobash, 6.
in whatever way he saw fit similarly to how parents could correct their children. The progress of the 1878 Act was primarily to curb the severity of abuse considered appropriate (i.e., he should not beat her to the point where he could be convicted of aggravated assault). Perhaps ironically, women’s empowerment through increased economic, social, and political autonomy especially in the post-Second World War years created a so-called crisis of masculinity in which men felt threatened by women’s advancements. Social commentators, authorities, and social workers implicitly condoned or at least sympathized with husbands’ violence as a reasonable reaction to this perceived loss of power.63

Women’s Aid Centers, which created refuges for battered wives, steadfastly maintained that women’s subordination under patriarchy, and not individual violent pathologies, was the primary cause of abuse in marriage. The common law concept of “coverture” made prosecution or even social proscription of marital abuse very difficult. Under this paradigm, husbands and wives became legally the same entity upon marriage. Culturally, the marital relationship was regarded as similar to that of parents and children; the husband was legally empowered to control his wife’s behavior because she was regarded as less capable and less intelligent. Therefore, just as many would sanction the physical correction (slapping, spanking, belting, etc.) of children for misbehaving, husbands who beat their wives also enjoyed social approval so long as the beating was considered reasonable or just.64 The 1878 Act in part undermined this concept and into the early 20th century, courts stopped explicitly invoking the idea of coverture and the absolute rule of husbands over wives was no longer officially recognized. However, the deeply

63 Dobash and Dobash, 10-11.
64 Dobash and Dobash.
ingrained concept of men’s rule over women and that a man’s house was his castle *de facto* remained. Courts and police into the 1970s were extremely reluctant to interfere inside a marital home. Part of this reason must stem from the fact that most police, legislators, magistrates, and others in positions of authority were men and either supported patriarchal control or were at least indifferent to its implications.

*Battered Women and the Police*

The Women’s Aid Centers held deeply critical views of the police. Most often, women who went to Women’s Aid refuges did so after many years of abuse and inaction by the police. In studies conducted by Dobash and Dobash, Pizzey and others, the attitudes of women towards police were complicated by many factors. Many women did not want their husband arrested or jailed after an assault, but instead wanted the assault to stop and the police to warn him against future assaults. Women did not want their husbands arrested and jailed for the same reasons women stayed in abusive relationships overall: nowhere else to go, no income, her love for her husband, and considerations for the children. However, battered women’s relationship with the police came down most often to how well they responded to her expectations and desires. A study cited by Bourlet found that when the police removed the man on request, women had a favorable view of police, but when they did not, then the women held a negative view. The women cited in the study were also split on whether they found the police helpful or not for their first assault, and this would necessarily influence their decision to contact the police for future assaults. Once a woman decided to enter a Women’s Aid refuge, many of the problems associated with living in an abusive home would simply disappear. Each refuge had a strict

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65 Bourlet, ix.
66 Bourlet, 46-47.
“no husbands or boyfriends” policy and carefully screened its male staff to be supportive and kind. However, there were cases when a woman’s partner would find her location and violently enter the refuge, such as happened to Jenny Smith who was described above. In these cases, the women would collectively protect her, but sometimes the police would be called. According to Bourlet, women in refuges contact the police more than any other service (such as solicitors or social services); but 64 percent of them thought the police were unhelpful because they did not want to intervene in a domestic dispute.67 This was the overwhelming reason women were critical of police when the assault happened in her own home.

The police as an institution held a policy of non-intervention in “domestic problems” as much as possible. This policy was revealed by a memorandum of the London Metropolitan Police Department submitted as evidence to the 1974 Parliamentary Committee on Marital Violence: “[w]hereas it is a general principle of police practice to not intervene in a situation which existed or had existed between husband and wife.”68 Moreover, a training manual issued by the International Association of Police chiefs further expounds the concept of non-intervention:

For the most part these disputes [marital violence] are personal matters requiring no direct police action. Once inside the home, the officer’s sole role is to preserve the peace…In dealing with family disputes the power of arrest should be exercised as a last resort. The officer should never create a police problem when there is only a family problem existing [my emphasis added].69

67 Bourlet, 25.
The fear of creating a police problem when there was only a family problem had a long
history, with the fear of a violent man or woman turning that violence on an unarmed
police officer in their home being part of the scenario.\textsuperscript{70}

Once the police did intervene, their options ranged from giving advice to the
couple to seek assistance from counsellors or solicitors to warnings to proceeding against a
crime. If the police decide to proceed against a crime (and they had discretion regarding if
and when to do this), they would most likely charge the assailant with a section under the
Offences against the Person Act, 1861, which deals with interpersonal violence. Most
often used under this Act are: Section 42: Common Assault, Section 47: Assault
Occasioning Actual Bodily Harm, Section 20: Unlawful Wounding, and Section 18:
Grievous Bodily Harm. The police usually would not take action on common assault, as
the penalty (£400 fine) was likely less than the victim could get by suing the assailant in
civil court. The other three, however, all involved actual harm to the victim (usually
defined as cuts or injuries that affect a person’s well-being, including emotional well-being)
and were subject to a police officer’s discretion. Sections 47 and 20 had a maximum
penalty of five years imprisonment, while Section 18 carried a maximum of life in prison.
Additionally, Section 18 required the state to prove an assailant had the intent to cause the
harm. Barring actually witnessing the crimes being committed, the police would have a
difficult time proving these offenses. Oftentimes, the police would “crime down” to
common assault whether they were present or when responding to a victim’s request. As
common assault victims were often advised to seek their own redress, the crime was never
recorded in local or national statistics and was never prosecuted.\textsuperscript{71}

\textsuperscript{70} Bourlet, 15.
\textsuperscript{71} Bourlet, 6.
It is difficult to put a number on domestic abuse cases in any real way. The first problem is the lack of reporting. According to studies by Dobash and Dobash, Pahl and Horley, women might endure eleven to thirty five assaults before they reported it to the police.\(^{72}\) Many women felt isolated and also believed the police would not help them. The Women’s National Commission Report (1985) found only two percent of women reported their domestic assaults to the police. The second issue was police under-reporting or “criming down” as explained above. Some police forces adopted a “stitch rule” meaning no action would be taken unless the women required stitches.\(^{73}\) Lastly, national statistics for violent crime did not specify if the violence was domestic assaults or other kinds of violence. From 1973 to 1983, recorded incidents of wounding and actual bodily harm nearly doubled from over 54,000 to over 104,000.\(^{74}\) While it cannot be determined what percentage of these were domestic assaults, Dobash and Dobash state about 25 percent of all reported assaults were from domestic violence incidents. A further complication is higher numbers of reports mean just that, reports. This does not bear on the actual amount of assaults committed. Over the course of the 1970s, the government began to realize domestic violence was a widespread and growing problem, even holding a House of Commons Select Committee on Violence in Marriage in 1975 to investigate. However, by 1990, Alan Bourlet cites concerns that its findings and recommendation regarding reporting and national statistics had not been followed. At best, it can be ascertained that at least a quarter of married women reported domestic violence in the period of this research, and many others suffered abuse but did not come to the police.

\(^{72}\) Cited by Bourlet, 36.  
\(^{73}\) Bourlet, 6.  
A significant problem facing abused women in relation to the police was the limits of the authority of British police. Since its inception in 1829, the British police have been enforcers of criminal law and could not intervene in civil law. This distinction has always been muddy as witnessed with the squatters. For much of the history of British policing, matters that happened in the home were not considered breaches of the Queen’s Peace, and therefore, the police have avoided intervention as much as possible. According to Bourlet, many police, as well as many citizens, regarded violence on the streets to be more of a police concern than violence in the home. The manual cited above did not form out of nowhere. In 1880, a police instruction book declared, “The police are not to interfere unnecessarily between a man and his wife who are quarrelling” unless it involved serious violence or disturbed the public. In 1900, there was a similar emphasis on non-intervention unless there was clear violence and public disturbance. Finally, in 1926, a police guidance suggested police could act *ultra vires* if they intervened in the home, and risked becoming the victim of violence themselves. \(^ {75}\) It may seem fantastic, but according to British custom and laws, the police were enforcers of criminal law but still subjected to civil law. This meant an officer intervening during a domestic violence situation could later be sued for trespass, damages, or other civil violations. These reasons, together with the widely perceived and likely patriarchal nature of the police cited above, account for the critical reception of the police by abused women. Furthermore, the Metropolitan Police Report into Domestic Violence (1986) found that the police overall:

1. Failed to protect women and failed to make arrests for serous violence.
2. Lacked sympathy for women, especially abused women.
3. Only responded in ways outlined by the law. \(^ {76}\)

\(^ {75}\) Bourlet, 15.
\(^ {76}\) Bourlet, 50.
Police often referred abused women to social agencies, which in turn were likely to say that they were not qualified to deal with the matter. Disagreement over whether marital abuse was a civil or criminal matter carried through into the 1980s when the first large-scale studies were conducted on the topic.\(^{77}\) Police often expressed frustration over women not pressing charges or going back to their abusive husbands, so considered police action over domestic violence to be a waste of time and resources. Reasons for the lack of prosecution will be discussed further below, but the reality of women’s dependency on men, especially married women, takes the lion’s share of the reason why many women continued to suffer rather than press charges or leave.

*Women against All Odds*

It is not possible to understand wife battery without understanding the historical and contemporary social construction and position of women generally and as wives specifically. While only accounting for social norms in the western world, Dobash and Dobash have written extensively about the “appropriate victims”: wives. Looking back at ancient Rome, they found that Romulus declared a wife must not withhold her obedience from her husband as she is his property and subject to whatever control he considered correct. Moreover, adultery—committed by the wife—was a breach control over a possession so severe that husbands were legally sanctioned to kill their wives without punishment.\(^{78}\) Cato the Censor spoke of this double standard when he proclaimed “you may with impunity put her to death without trial [for adultery]—but if you should commit adultery…she must not presume to lay a finger on you.”\(^{79}\) The onset of Christianity quickly maintained and solidified the marital and indeed gender hierarchy of the Roman world.

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\(^{78}\) Dobash and Dobash, 37.

\(^{79}\) Dobash and Dobash, 37.
Moving ahead to the modern era, publically sanctioned violence against “misbehaving” women could be seen in the widespread practice of “branking” invented in fifteenth century Scotland and used until the eighteenth century throughout Great Britain. A nagging or scolding wife would be forced to wear “an iron bridle with a padlock and spike to enter the mouth” and paraded around the streets by a cord. 80 Public chastisement largely moved into the marital home by the end of the nineteenth century. According to English Common Law, a woman forfeited her legal personal identity, rights to property, personal credit, and guardianship to any children she might have upon marriage. A husband gained conjugal rights (husbands could legally rape their wives until 1991), sexual fidelity, and obedience all enforced by violence if considered necessary. 81

The legal history of husbands’ physical dominance over their wives is only part of the story. Women’s subordination to men permeates western thought and culture, even the Old Testament declared, “For Adam was first formed, then Eve. For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man.” 82 Further, because Eve was tempted by the Serpent and brought ruin to Adam and thus Paradise, women’s position as irresponsible temptress has carried on down the ages in social and legal prescriptions. The very concept of the social contract, so crucial to Europeans’ understanding of civil society, actively ignores and negates women’s presence. Renown political theorist Carol Pateman calls this the “sexual contract”, and argues that men’s political rights and the idea of “political man” depends upon his sexual rights over women and his rule over women. This filters through into feminist and Marxist

critiques of capitalism. However, the social contract was always presented, from Locke, Rousseau, and Hobbes forward, as man in nature giving up his wild insecure freedom for a social and stable freedom under the protection of a state. But, women in this scenario became objects of control and domination because they were considered to have remained elusive “wild.” Men gave up their freedom in order to contract with other men for their mutual benefit. However, women were not considered rational individuals who were born free, thus they could not be parties to the formation of the social contract. What this meant in practice was men’s political and civil rights and freedoms depended on his domination of women, especially in the home. He had access to her body, her labor, her children, her property, and her obedience. Into the late nineteenth century, married women became civilly dead upon marriage and had the same civil position as slaves.

The Women’s Liberation Movement, Women’s Aid Centres, and feminism generally spoke about violence against women as a symptom of women’s oppression under patriarchy. It is thus worthwhile to spend some time to consider patriarchy in history. The traditional idea of “patriarchy” was invoked at least until the seventeenth century as a way in which religion and kings claimed power as “fathers” over their subjects and construed authority as parents over children. This justification lost widespread political application with the dawning of social contract theories. However, a classic sense of patriarchy meaning political and familial authority of the father continued. In the modern sense, the social contract applies to men as a fraternity. It is no longer necessary that men as fathers rule over wives and children, but instead that men as men have dominance over all women. It was this social position of women as subordinates that fostered the possibility

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84 Pateman, 118
85 Pateman, 24-25.
of abuse. Private property as the basis for political rights under the modern state completed the process of men’s social contract being dependent upon his sexual contract over women. Women in the home served as unpaid reproductive labor in order to keep men’s productive capabilities open for capitalist exploitation. A man’s wage (and later also welfare benefit) was intended to cover the cost of his living as well as his wife’s and children’s maintenance. However, he was under very little pressure to consider those factors when he spent his money. In practice, a man could withhold or spend all his money on himself, meaning his wife provided free labor that contributed to capitalist production. Wages and benefits served to keep a steady pool of labor available for exploitation, and although women were meant to stay in the reproductive sphere at home, they would be called upon when necessary for cheap market labor.86

The growing Women’s Liberation Movement analyzed and critiqued many aspects of women’s subordinate position in British society. During the National Women’s Liberation Movement conference in Edinburgh, 1974, a “Women’s Liberation Workshop” outlined key aspects of women’s low status in society. The Ministry of Education (run by Margaret Thatcher) recommended less funding for science in girls’ and mixed schools than for boys’ schools. At the time, women made up only 28 percent of all university students. Despite Oxbridge opening up degree exams to women in the 1920s, by the early 1970s only 16 percent of places were given to women. Men out-numbered women in medical schools, government retraining, and Industrial Training Boards.87 The Trades Union Congress had thirty-three seats on its General Council, but only two of those were

allocated to women, despite the fact that women made up a third of all union membership. The discrimination of women at the top, perhaps inevitably, trickled down to the shop floor.

The average male manual worker in Britain earned nearly double what the average female manual worker earned in the early 1970s (61.4p per hour compared to 36.09p per hour). Eighty-three percent of women earned less than 55p per hour and 96.4 percent earned less than £1.00 per hour.\(^88\) These wage differential statistics do not account for the fact that most women were confined to working “women’s jobs” that typically paid less because it was expected that her income was simply “pin money.” Nor do these facts show that women often could only work in low or unskilled occupations. Moreover, these kinds of jobs were insecure generally, but especially considering women were often tied to the home and children. Employers of low-wage and low-skilled work had little incentive not to sack a woman who needed to miss work to take care of sick children. The 1971 Industrial Relations Act enshrined this discrimination because it allowed employers to fire without notice or explanation any staff who worked less than twenty-two hours per week—most likely these would be women.\(^89\) Two rather arcane-seeming restrictions on women’s employment existed in the early 1970s. A marriage bar existed in the diplomatic service, meaning a female diplomat had to retire when she got married. In addition, airhostesses had to retire upon marriage.

The Equal Pay Act 1970 was passed in part due to pressure of women machinists’ pickets at Dagenham Ford car factories in 1968, but did not come into effect until 1975.\(^90\)

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\(^89\) Industrial Relations Act (1971).

\(^90\) Sisterhood and After Research Team, “Equal Pay and Equality Legislation,” The British Library
This legislation was meant to end the pay disparity between men and women doing the same work. Unfortunately, most women were doing “women’s work” and were often in industries or sectors that were majority women. This meant that if there were no male coworkers to be equal to, then there was no obligation to raise the women’s wages. Other times, women doing the same work as men would have their jobs reclassified so that they would still get paid less. Pay disparity was not just an immediate income issue. Women’s low pay also affected their welfare state benefits and pensions. Single women working part time or at low wages still needed to make contributions to National Insurance, but because the system expects a male breadwinner, the pay outs to women for sickness or unemployment were significantly less than that for a man (single or married). Moreover, any National Insurance contributions a single woman paid would be lost when she married.  

A married woman could choose to continue to pay full contributions (at a lower payout), or opt out of paying and be dependent on her husband’s income and benefits. The nature of the system was geared toward a male breadwinner model. This was demonstrated in the lower payouts for women as wives, but also in the Family Income Supplement (FIS), paid to all families with children. This benefit went to the full-time working male. If the woman worked full-time or earned more, she could not claim FIS. The only way a woman with children could claim FIS was if there was no man present or he was so severely disabled that the woman had to work. Single women claiming the Family Income Supplement led to a government crackdown on “cohabitation,” which will be explored further below.

The taxation system in Britain assumed a male breadwinner in the 1970s. His wages were meant to support himself, his wife, and their children. A husband was granted a tax

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allowance of £995, and he was also legally responsible for his wife’s tax forms. A wife lost her personal tax allowance on marriage, but if she was working, retained an earned income relief of £675.92 However, the 1971 census showed 267,470 married couples in which the wife was the main wage earner and about 1.6 million economically inactive husbands (meaning they were retired, permanently sick, students, or other reasons).93 A woman in full time work could not claim Supplementary Benefits (SB) for herself, but if she worked full time and her husband did not work, he could claim SB. In order for a wife to claim SB, her husband had to claim it for her. Legally, though, the money was his, which formed an incredible problem with regards to domestic violence. It took an appeal to the Supplementary Benefits Commission to force a husband to maintain his wife and family from SB.94 It was entirely likely that the husband had quite reasonable justifications for not working and that both partners were trying to reverse traditional gender roles or live more egalitarian. However, up to the 1970s, the welfare and taxation system did not recognize married couples with a female breadwinner as legitimate.

The disparity in women’s pay and treatment in employment and welfare carried over and was influenced by a more generalized rhetoric of her irresponsibility and lack of intelligence. All these factors became particularly important when a woman faced domestic violence. The question “why doesn’t she just leave?” missed very significant obstacles to her getting out. Building societies only granted mortgages to 3.8 percent of female borrowers. Most companies selling items (like furniture, appliances, or other domestic necessities) on hire-purchase required a male guarantor to sign for a woman. Until the

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93 Lister and Wilson, 7.
94 Lister and Wilson, 14.
1976 Domestic Violence and Matrimonial Proceedings Act, a woman who left her abusive husband was not entitled to their marital home or profits from its sale.\textsuperscript{95} Few women could ever serve on juries because qualification for jury service was being a householder or rent or rate payer; very few women were. There was only one woman High Court Judge in 1974.\textsuperscript{96} At the same time, only twenty-two of 635 MPs in the House of Commons were women, with 12 percent serving as Local Government Councilors. Women were the majority of teachers, but rarely heads of schools. Women were not allowed to be ordained by the Catholic Church or Church of England. Only 15 percent of British doctors were women. The marginalization of women from positions of power astounding.

\textit{Battered Women and Social Security}

Give the significant historical, cultural, and social restrictions on women’s freedom and autonomy, it was small wonder that a battered wife would not choose to leave her husband even if she strongly so desired. On top of the practical difficulties of finding accommodation and securing income, a wife who left her husband gave up the main socially accepted role designed for her while admitting she had, in the eyes of most of the rest of society, failed at marriage, an institution so deeply ingrained as the primary goal of young girls.\textsuperscript{97} Women who left their husbands would perhaps inevitably become the responsibility of the state in terms of housing, income, and childcare. If chapter two demonstrated anything, it demonstrated the general social and official prejudice against claimants as “scroungers” and “idlers.” Women who left their husbands faced the stigma

\textsuperscript{96} Women’s Liberation Workshop, “Discrimination against Women,” National Women’s Liberation Conference, Edinburgh, July 1974, 4; Today, there is only one female judge on the High Court and England has one of the lowest proportions of female judges compared to the rest of Europe according to https://www.theguardian.com/law/2016/oct/06/proportion-of-women-judges-in-uk-among-lowest-in-europe
\textsuperscript{97} Dobash and Dobash, 147.
of an “ex-wife” but also an additional stigma as a drain on social services. The entire welfare state assumed and enshrined in its provision that women were dependents of men. When she left her husband, the “unsupported woman” became a new burden on the state.

When a woman left her husband, she needed to apply for various emergency needs payments. To do this, a visiting officer must assess what she needed and how much the payment should be. If she was at a friend’s house or a Women’s Aid Refuge, the visiting officer would likely tell her to go back home and collect her things. The practical reason of the officer not wanting to grant money for items that a woman already possessed ignored the underlying reason for her need. Visiting officers, like DHSS office clerks were allowed broad discretion in their powers. Like office clerks, their social background influenced this discretion. The trend among social workers, like doctors and police, was to advise a woman to try to make her marriage work rather than leave. In the case of social security, the prime motivation of the officer dealing with an abused woman was the same as that described by the claimants’ unions: view all claims with suspicion and try to limit the release of money as much as possible. An attitude of indifference to her abuse might also be placed upon the general stigma against claimants. Visiting officers and the DHSS in general did not like to deal with women in Women’s Aid Refuges. Women’s Aid Refuges depended upon rent allowances paid to the women living there. However, due to the decentralized “leaderless” nature of the Refuges, the DHSS had a hard time recognizing a “landlord” to whom the rent payments would be made. Other funding sources also had this reservation.

The media’s relationship to the problem of battered women was multifaceted. On the one hand wife-battery, when it was discussed at all, was most often depicted as a “problem” of the working class, racial minorities, alcoholics, or immigrants. In addition, popular culture well in the 1980s depicted marital violence as humorous, trivial, and normalized. Take for example the incredibly popular Andy Capp comics. Andy was a working-class bloke from Hartlepool who drank too much, stayed out at the pub all night, and loved football. He was supposed to be the quintessential working-class northerner with his cloth cap and loutish behavior. He was also often in physical confrontations with his wife, Flo. In the first ten years of publication, 1957-1967, there were over 140 scenes of domestic violence in the strip. Now, Andy and Flo both gave as good as they got, but most often the violence, while presented comically, was clearly part of a normalizing process. According to British Cartoon Archive spokesperson Nick Hiley, “his [Andy’s] violence was quite acceptable to the newspapers and the readers probably because domestic violence itself was considered acceptable at the time.” In one of the very first appearances of Andy and Flo, a clearly beaten Flo sits on the floor while Andy explains one of his few pleasures is beating her.

100 Leatherdale.
On the other hand, Women’s Aid actively engaged and utilized the media to promote its cause. Erin Pizzey first engaged the *Brentford and Chiswick Times*, which helped to pressure Hounslow Council to give over the house on 2 Belmont Terrace that became the first refuge. After that, she and her colleagues conducted several interviews as well as placed ads in newspapers to reach out to battered women. This publicity encouraged women who had been keeping their beating a secret to reach out to Women’s Aid. Letters flooded in, often beginning like one from Yorkshire, “Dear Mrs Pizzey, I read your article
yesterday,” and then opened up about years of abuse at the hands of their husbands.

Thames Television produced a gritty documentary about Chiswick House, *Scream Quietly or the Neighbours Will Hear*, in 1973 that further raised awareness of the refuge and publicity about the problem of wife beating. Women’s Aid’s stated objectives include seeking and effectively using publicity. Their purpose was to provide immediate shelter to the victims of domestic violence, but also to change the social acceptance of marital abuse and the patriarchal attitudes that allowed it.

So, Women’s Aid continuously engaged with the media. BBC Radio, Thames TV, and newspapers from the *Sun* to the *Guardian* ran programs, articles, and interviews. Erin Pizzey recounted giving hundreds of interviews in the early days, which resulted in receiving hundreds of phone calls from desperate women. The media is an important institution when it comes to changing public opinion or raising awareness. Like so many of the movements discussed in this book, the Women’s Aid organization benefitted early on from mostly sympathetic press coverage. Headlines could be sensationalistic and the risk of creating a “moral panic” was real. However, considering the topic discussed was the horror of domestic violence and the intention of Women’s Aid was to shock society out of complacency, it is possible to forgive the media for doing what the media often does. Headlines such as “Screams Echoed Throughout a Large Block of London Flats as a Man Beat His Wife” (*Weekly News*, 20.01.1973) or “Hidden Horror of Britain’s Battered Wives” (*Daily Mirror*, 19.06.1973) might lack the nuance desired for a sensitive topic but certainly got people’s attention to a hitherto ignored social problem.\(^{101}\) The problem of wife beating and the development of the Women’s Aid movement became newsworthy while also

instigating a media campaign to raise financial support for the refuges. The moral indignation over the fact of wife beating combined with chastisement of government and social agencies for not providing relief.

Conclusion

The Women’s Aid Federation in general, and the Women’s Aid refuges such as Chiswick House and others in particular, was a direct action-oriented core of the broader Women’s Liberation Movement. The second wave of feminism emerged in the United States and Europe after the gains of greater educational, political, and employment opportunities for women. However, these advancements had not fixed the deep history of male dominance and discrimination. While the feminist movement generally advocated for legislative reforms to prevent inequalities in the new fields women occupied, the Women’s Aid Federation took that position further by linking women’s subordination directly to domestic violence as both a consequence and means of control. Looking at the history of family law, welfare provisions and police intervention, one can see a social context of systemic oppression of women with wife battery as a built-in if not fundamental component of male dominance. Women’s Aid was significant because it spoke out against the terrors of domestic violence and advocated for greater female emancipation as a method to overturn patriarchal control. Furthermore, the Women’s Aid refuges were a direct-action solution to the duel crises of abuse and having nowhere to which to escape.

The broader women’s movement pressured the government to pass protective legislation such as the Domestic Violence and Matrimonial Procedures Act 1976, but without somewhere safe to go, the Act—like injunctions—were little more than pieces of paper. In ways similar to the squatters and claimants already examined, the Women’s Aid refuges provided a community-based, direct-action solution when the bureaucracy of the
state could not address the acute needs of the people. In the final chapter, the grassroots activism of working-class black Britons against popular and official racism in the form of discrimination in housing, education, employment, and policing as well as sanctioned harassment, violence and murder, will be examined.
Chapter IV
Defense is No Offense: Working-Class Black Britons’ Fight against Racism

“Babylon is falling. We once beggars are now choosers.”
--Steel Pulse, 1978

On 2 March 1981, 20,000 – 25,000 mostly black Britons marched through the streets of London to protest decades of racial discrimination. They had faced violence and death at the hands of the police and racist extremists. They had also faced more day-to-day prejudice and exclusion at school, work, and from the general population. The immediate reason for this march was the deaths of thirteen West Indian teenagers and young adults at a birthday party on 18 January 1981 on New Cross Road in Deptford. The families of the victims believed the fire was arson caused by a firebomb thrown in through a window by a white person. This attack was the single most deadly event in the history of racist violence against Britain's racial minority communities since they began to arrive and settle in large numbers after the Second World War. The police, according to the victims’ families, handled the investigation into the deaths of the thirteen young West Indians poorly. The police vacillated between trying to blame a fight at the party as the cause of the fire and declaring it a tragic accident. The families, who quickly organized themselves into the New Cross Massacre Action Committee, raised the issue of police complacency and mishandling of the case. Over three hundred people from across the UK attended that first meeting. The New Cross Massacre Action Committee also began an immediate counter-offensive against the media, especially accusing the Daily Mail of spreading the false rumor that police had arrested partygoers who were under suspicion of causing the fire. Moreover, the national papers, radio, and television news coverage barely mentioned the deaths of thirteen young people and the serious injury of twenty-six others. Therefore,
the New Cross Massacre Action Committee began to rally around the slogan of “thirteen dead, nothing said” and began organizing regular meetings.

The 2 March 1981 march through London, dubbed by organizers “The Black People’s Day of Action,” was one of the largest demonstrations against racism Britain had ever seen. It began at the site of the tragic fire, 439 New Cross Road, and wound its way north eventually ending at Hyde Park, after an eight-hour march. The march was deliberately planned on a Monday in order to disrupt the working week, especially as its route went through Fleet Street (in order to force the press stationed there to pay attention), up Regent Street, down Cavendish Street, and to Marble Arch. These are main business streets in London that would be filled with commuters, workers, shoppers, and tourists. Furthermore, the New Cross Massacre Action Committee previously asked Parliament to suspend activities for the day in respect of the thirteen dead. Parliament only agreed to a half day of business. John La Rose, the chairperson of the New Cross Massacre Action Committee, presented letters on behalf of the families to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police David McNee, and the Speaker of the House of Commons George Thomas. The letters spoke to the anger of the victims’ families because of the lack of acknowledgement or action on the part of the state.

The New Cross Massacre Action Committee was a direct response to the suspected firebombing on 18 January 1981. However, it did not exist in a vacuum. Black and Asian Britons had been organizing themselves into community and cultural defense groups since at least the late 1960s. This chapter is an exploration of the development of black Britons’ grassroots responses to structural and everyday racism experienced roughly from Enoch Powell’s “Rivers of Blood” speech in 1968 to the explosions of urban racial
insurrection in 1981 and 1985. The “Black People’s Day of Action” is remembered as a significant effort by black Britons to publicly assert their humanity and rejection of discrimination and racism that they had suffered over two decades. Long-time activist John La Rose regarded the day as “an historic event” when black people would no longer tolerate their treatment by society, and if the police would not protect them, then they would protect themselves. Speaking in 2011, playwright and actor Kwame Kwei-Armah, who witnessed the march, said it was a “formative moment” for black political expression in Britain while University of London sociology professor Les Black argues, “the response to the fire marked a ‘turning point’ in multicultural Britain because ‘black people spoke for themselves.’” The “Black People’s Day of Action” could not have existed without the years of organizations and networks established throughout the UK over the previous twenty years.

The New Cross Massacre Action Committee was an example of the many anti-racist organizations that emerged in postwar Britain, although it instigated one of the largest public protests. Grassroots black organizing in postwar Britain had three main pillars: black power militants, black educational reform organizations, and anti-racist groups. While not always organized in the traditional sense of membership lists and dues, they all held in common the shared experience of exploitation, discrimination, and

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1 During this period in the UK, those with African ancestry as well as those from the Indian subcontinent and other places to denote their shared experience of racism from whites was more important than their cultural, racial, or other differences used “black” as a political term (Institute of Race Relations, “Definitions,” http://www.irr.org.uk/research/statistics/definitions/). This chapter’s focus is on Britons with African ancestry although it is often impossible to separate completely the experiences of African- and Asian-descended Britons. The term “black” will be used throughout this chapter to denote those with African heritage though when possible Asian-descended Britons will be identified as such.


marginalization at all levels of society. The various groups were similar because they asserted black cultural agency and rejected their status as inferior. However, they differed significantly in their criticism of capitalism and justifications of violence. Nonetheless, they were important because they offered a counterpoint to mainstream anti-racist organizations like the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination (CARD), the Institute for Race Relations, and the United Coloured People’s Associations, which were tied to establishment groups like the Labour Party and trade unions. The main distinction of these grassroots groups was that they envisioned a radically different Britain whereas mainstream groups sought incremental accommodation within the existing system. While the Conservative Party was more overt in its racially discriminatory rhetoric and policies, the Labour Party, Trades Union Congress, and even far-left trade unions engaged in exclusionary and racist behaviors. By the late 1970s, enough black people were turned off by the establishment’s agenda to focus their organizing on independent and radical grassroots black activism. Finally, although united by a shared imperial ancestry, there were vital differences in the experiences of black and Asian Britons. Asians who ended up in Britain tended to form a section of the middle class, they were not as systematically demonized as a threat by the government or police, and they maintained a strong tradition of industrial unionism, which could effectively agitate for wider rights and benefits. Therefore, while exceptions exist, there was not a strong history of multicultural grassroots organizing, and this chapter seeks primarily to tell the story of specifically black working-class community activism. Despite comprising less than one percent of the population for much of the period, white society viewed non-white Britons as an existential threat in terms of culture, employment, education, housing, and crime. The “Black People’s Day of Action” was a prelude to the massive black uprisings that would shake Britain later in 1981.
and again in 1985. However, if decades of conflict can explain the outburst of the riots, then I argue a more positive legacy to understand about 1981 was the decades of quotidian cultural, educational, and theoretical activities at the grassroots that built up the politicized black voice, which expressed itself in increasingly strong terms up to, but especially after 1981.

Linton Kwesi Johnson, regarded by many as the paramount black British poet of the twentieth century, reflected on 1981 as the most significant date in the history of black experience in Britain in the second half of the twentieth century. To organize a march of more than 20,000 people in London required a national network of sympathetic organizations and significant logistical coordination. But also, 1981 of course witnessed the massive urban disturbances in Brixton over the weekend of 10-12 April. In July, Handsworth in Birmingham, Hyson Green in Nottingham, Moss Side in Manchester, Southall in London, and Toxteth in Liverpool all rose up. There were also smaller disturbances in Bedford, Bristol, Coventry, Gloucester, Halifax, Leeds, Leicester, Southampton, Wolverhampton, and Edinburgh as well as “dozens of other places” in July. From April 1980, in St. Paul’s to July 1981, there was a cumulative effect of racist attacks and confrontations between black people and the police. According to historian Ron Ramdin, it was the deaths of the thirteen young West Indians and lack of police response that really activated black consciousness in a way that resulted in minor skirmishes during the 2 March 2 1981 demonstration but blew up into full-fledged insurrection during the following months. Moreover, Paul Gilroy argues the tragedy of the

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New Cross fire galvanized blacks all over the country to organize in a political way, which created the right conditions for the violent uprisings in April and July 1981. It is for these reasons that I want to explore the history of activism that led to the “Black People’s Day of Action.”

The Scarman Report: The Brixton Disorders, 10-12 April 1981, discussed below, was significant precisely because it was the voice of the establishment acknowledging the plight of Britain’s racial minorities in terms of lack of jobs, poor schooling, police harassment, inhuman living conditions, and little hope for the future. Before Lord Scarman could publish his report in November 1981, there were further outbreaks of violence up and down the country in July. However, there was also the case of the so-called Bradford 12 who realized the police would not protect them from violent attacks by racist skinheads, so they stockpiled petrol bombs to fight them off themselves. When police arrested and charged them with conspiracy to use explosives to cause harm, the twelve youths all claimed their right as British citizens to defend themselves against attack. The jury found them all not guilty. It is therefore a reasonable claim, indeed one that is still made to this day, that 1981 was a kind of turning point in the black experience in Britain. After over three decades of discrimination in the midst of deep structural changes in the economy and Britain’s place in the world, black Britons loudly refused to be second or third class citizens anymore. While the riots of 1958, 1976, 1981, and 1985 were important, this chapter primarily seeks to illuminate the lesser-known, earlier-and-continuing organizing and consciousness-raising actions of several grassroots movements of black Britons.

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The Black Presence in Britain

People of African descent have been in the British Isles since they were a Roman province. However, the black British experience in the twentieth-century United Kingdom is linked directly to the post-World War II influx of migrant labor and the decolonization of the British Empire. Beginning in 1947, the British government began the legal creation of the status “Citizen of the United Kingdom and Colonies” whereby each member of the newly established Commonwealth would legislate its own citizenship category as opposed to the former status of “British subject.” The government created this status in part to bring in subjects from the Empire who could fill the post-war labor shortage due to the loss of so many working-age men during the war. The government established the Foreign Labour Committees to look for potential recruits in war-torn Europe and eventually in the West Indies. According to Kathleen Paul, the workers from Europe were treated as if the government wanted to naturalize them as citizens eventually; they were “potential Britons.” However, Paul cites an entirely different attitude toward the West Indian recruits, from inadequate housing to little effort made to assimilate or welcome them.

West Indians trickled into the United Kingdom from the First World War until after the second, but the first major arrival was the 492 Jamaicans on the Empire Windrush in June 1948. They were spontaneous and mostly paid their own way. Neither the government in Kingston nor London organized this trip. Even before the Empire Windrush arrived, the British government began to worry about the implications of non-white colonial migration. Prime Minister Clement Atlee dreaded the arrival and ordered his

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11 Paul, 64
12 Paul, 116.
ministers to do all they could to prevent it. Colonial Minister Arthur Creech Jones, while forced to acknowledge the migrants were British subjects (soon to be citizens under the 1948 Act), declared the *Windrush* passengers were a “problem” that would soon cause a “public scandal.”

Paul argues racist policies at the top created racist hostility among the public rather than a racist society pressuring the government to create racist laws. She argues the racial restrictions enacted after the rather *laissez-faire* 1948 Act (i.e., Commonwealth Immigrants Acts 1962 and 1968 and Immigration Act 1971) provided a racially exclusionary attitude from the government, which prompted and justified racism among the public. While a worthwhile argument, there was more at play than racist elites simply wagging the dog of a non-racist public.

To understand the history of the black presence in Britain, one must also understand the history of the development of English racism. From the period of Queen Elizabeth I (r. 1558-1603) through the governments of Margaret Thatcher (1979-1990), elites projected internal English problems onto outsiders, especially those with a different “race.” Moreover, beginning in the 1790s, the development of the British Empire went hand in glove with emerging pseudoscientific racism that constructed a near-consensus among intellectuals that white people were superior to all non-white people. When describing racial feelings after World War II, Peter Fryer describes racial prejudice as the ignorance and misunderstanding of different people that can be remedied by increased contact; it is cultural and psychological. He then says racism is more internally consistent and systematic than prejudice, usually created for economic and political reasons. Over

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13 Paul, 116.
14 Paul, xi.
17 Peter Fryer, 133-134.
the course of the nineteenth century, racial ideas, pseudoscience, nationalism, and the Empire transformed racism into everyday commonsense among the population at large. At the same time, economic and political elites in Britain systematically adopted racist ideology well into the twentieth century. By the time the black presence increased after the Second World War, one could see a public adhering to racial prejudice while members of the elite held varying shades of outright racism and would incorporate their views into their policies when they felt it necessary.

According to distinguished British cultural theorist Stuart Hall, “race” is a category given external and almost ahistorical dimensions; e.g., racial mixing causes social or economic problems within a nation. Hall states that social or economic problems could simply be blamed on “the blacks,” but goes on to explain that “race” and “racism” were historically determined i.e., who “the blacks” were and what is wrong with them changed based on many other historical factors. Hall convincingly articulates the concept of “racisms,” meaning there were significant differences between the racism displayed by the public or the government toward native populations in the Empire to the racism expressed toward larger numbers of black people in the metropolis on a permanent basis. While the average worker might not have thought too much of colonial peoples during the Empire, they would have likely unflinchingly believed themselves to be members of a superior race, and this was exploited by elites to mitigate class-based agitation. The fates of the working class in the Empire and the Metropole were always closely linked. However, when former colonials began to settle in large numbers “at home” in Britain, the white working class, imbued with the racial prejudice and subjected to the racist rhetoric described by Fryer,

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18 Hall, *Selected Political Writings*, 142-143
19 Hall, *Selected Political Writings*, 143.
20 Hall, *Selected Political Writings*, 146.
now had to compete directly over legitimately scarce resources. The “crises” in post-war Britain—housing, employment, welfare provisions, et cetera—were not crises of race, but of capitalism. How a capitalist crisis turned into a crisis of race, according to Hall and his student Paul Gilroy, was by using “the blacks” as a continual outside problem that was now at home. Therefore, “the blacks” were the reason for the shortages or deterioration of housing, jobs, economic opportunities, or other forms of social breakdown. For Hall, the crisis was not race, but it was through race that many people experienced it.

If Stuart Hall’s Gramscian theoretical exploration of race and racisms is to be believed (I think it is), then in examining whether racial hostility in post-war Britain came from a groundswell of popular racial prejudice or top-down racist policies becomes more complicated. On the one hand, the Empire was not a creation of the British public. Although, until the end of World War II, most would agree the British population accepted it and benefitted from it. Furthermore, the ideological hegemony of white racial superiority that was constructed over the course of the Empire’s existence was common enough among the public and the government. It is also worth mentioning that as the franchise expanded in the late nineteenth and early-twentith centuries, government policies, at least in theory, partly reflected the public will. Paul and Kalbir Shukra posit that a racist government enacted racist laws and promoted a racist ideology. However, Peter

21 Stuart Hall, Selected Writings, 150-153; Gilroy, 19-20, 30.
Fryer, Ron Ramdin, and Stuart Hall clearly come out on the side of saying it was the public (though led by some demagogue politicians like Enoch Powell) who pushed the government to enact more restrictions on immigration and later deportations based on racial exclusion.  

Indeed, the increase in black presence after the war was due to labor shortages and then recruitment by the government and industries in the Empire; both of these factors were out of the public’s hands. However, as Fryer points out, the racial animosity in the forms of prejudice and systematic discrimination were present in the society as a whole long before the 492 Jamaicans arrived on the Windrush. A latent racism existed that could be marshalled into pressure on the government to act (including, as will be shown, in policing black communities) especially by political opportunists such as Peter Griffiths in the 1964 Smethwick election or by Enoch Powell, who seemed to have more success in lobbying for racist causes outside of government than in it. Between the 1958 “race riots” in Nottingham and Notting Hill and Powell’s 1968 “Rivers of Blood” speech, racism became institutionalized within the government. Griffiths’ victory joined the 1962 Act and the 1968 Act as increasingly government-sanctioned racial hostility. In 1961, Labour Party chair Tom Driberg denounced the pending Commonwealth Immigrants Act as being born out of white racism and not because of the black presence. Yet, due to Griffiths’ (a Tory) success with “If you want a nigger for a neighbor, vote Labour” slogan in 1964, the


25 Stuart Hall, Selected Political Writings, 149, 151.
26 Fryer, 380
Labour Party began to move to a more restrictionist position, especially with the 1968 Immigration Act. Ambalavaner Sivanandan, theorist and director of the Institute of Race Relations, argues this was exemplary of the government institutionalizing racism in response to public demand, while some MPs at the time denounced the 1968 Act as “pandering to the racists.”

Government and business policies created conditions that allowed for popular hostility against immigrants, especially as the economy went into a slight recession in the late 1950s. By concentrating West Indians into low-paying, low-skilled work, resentment by the white working class developed as they sought those jobs. Furthermore, many immigrants believed they would come to the United Kingdom for a short time, earn a lot of money, and then return home as wealthy middle class. However, by being streamed into low-paying work, many found it difficult to meet basic needs, let alone amass a fortune to take back home. Before the 1968 Race Relations Act, many landlords and landladies openly posted “No Coloured” or “European Only” signs for their rental properties. Only a tiny percentage of white property owners would let to non-white tenants, and landlords habitually charged higher prices for black tenants than they would for white tenants. Landlords would also use violence and intimidation against non-white tenants who attempted to go to rent tribunals. As a result, some immigrants pooled together resources to buy up housing estates and let to other immigrants. This often had mixed results. On the one hand, the non-white landlord would take great pride in his new property and paint and refurbish it, which should have earned him the respect of his white neighbors. On the

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27 Fryer, 383-384.
29 Ramdin, 190-193.
other hand, this created a situation where whole neighborhoods and districts would be “taken over” by blacks from whites, adding to the resentment already present in the labor market, which could then be cited by politicians from Enoch Powell to Margaret Thatcher that Britain was being “swamped” by an alien culture. 30 Indeed, while the so-called 1958 race riots in Notting Hill and Nottingham might be dismissed as Teddy Boy hooliganism, it could also be that those Teds shouting “Keep Britain White” and claiming to go “nigger hunting” were only the loud public spectacle of a more pervasive racist attitude.

Therefore, over the course of the 1960s, the postwar policies to increase the labor force led to policies that tried to limit foreign labor in the British economy. As the economy contracted, the “native” labor force began to feel resentment against those the government had allowed to enter and work, and thus agitated to limit immigration. The initial prejudices of employers and landlords resulted in the concentration of immigrants in certain industries and in certain housing sectors. While the total population of non-white Britons during this period hovered around one percent (and today is only about three percent), as Sascha Auerbach tells us, hostility to outsiders is not tied to their having a large population. 31 This concentration in low-paying jobs and decaying dwellings led to an actual culture of criminality and marginalization but also the heightened perception by whites of immigrants being unskilled, lazy, dirty, and dangerous. While the government and business wanted and benefitted from the initial influx of migrant labor, it was the wider population and especially the working class that had to deal with the consequences.

30 Paul, 120; Hiro, 51.
When the government tried to discriminate against “foreign labor,” it had the effect of promoting and sanctioning discrimination against non-white foreigners.\(^3\)

*Black Power in Britain*

In July 1967, former chairman of the United States’ civil rights organization the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) Stokely Carmichael visited London to attend the Dialectics of Liberation conference. Many in Britain’s black community regard this visit as giving a significant boost to the emerging black power movement. Carmichael met with members of the Universal Coloured People’s Association (UCPA), which had formed just a month previously.\(^3\) Immigrant activists such as Michael X also took part in the meeting. The UCPA took the example of the American black power movement, including SNCC and the Black Panthers, to assert black cultural identity while also bringing in aspects of Britain’s own legacy of anti-colonial protest and proclaiming the place of black people as the global majority.\(^4\) The UCPA and black power organizations that followed attempted to raise black consciousness through regular meetings, newspapers, and black cultural supplementary schools, the latter formed the basis of the Black Students Movement and Black Parents Movement that were so instrumental for the 1981 “Black People’s Day of Action” discussed at the beginning of this chapter.

The Universal Coloured People’s Association began with regular meetings at the Speaker’s Corner in Hyde Park. Eventually, seventy-six people met in Notting Hill on 5 June 1967 to form a dues-paying organization, and they elected Nigerian playwright Obi Egbuna their president.\(^5\) After Carmichael’s visit, the UCPA outlined its philosophy in


\(^{34}\) Wild, 6.

\(^{35}\) Wild, 89.
Black Power in Britain: a Special Statement by the Universal Coloured People’s Association. It was derivative in style of the US black power movement, but its content focused more heavily on a British-specific critique of colonialism. The UK was, after all, the center of a large (though declining) imperial power, so members of the UCPA likely had first- or second-hand experience with actually existing imperialism. The UCPA set the standard of British black power organizations to take on an explicitly anti-imperial stance, giving material and rhetorical aid to anti-colonial and national liberation movements across the globe. The UCPA’s paper, Black Power Newsletter often featured articles about national liberation movements in Mozambique, Rhodesia, Angola, and, perhaps surprisingly, Northern Ireland.\textsuperscript{36} The organization also promoted “black is beautiful” and held cultural nights, poetry readings, and urged its readers to vote against the Conservatives in elections.

Internal divisions always marred the organization, and Egbuna left in April 1968 to form the more militant Black Panther Movement, preceding a total disintegration of the UCPA.\textsuperscript{37}

The British Black Panther Movement was one of the most secretive and ideologically rigid of all the black power organizations of this period. While it took its name from and corresponded with the United States’ Black Panther Party, the Black Panther Movement avoided the spotlight while engaging in constant activity among London’s black communities. In July 1968, founder Obi Egbuna was arrested for distributing a pamphlet called “What to do if cops lay their hands on a Black man at the Speaker’s Corner,” and soon dropped out of the movement altogether. The Black Panther Movement was the most active among British black power groups in promoting cultural

\textsuperscript{36} Wild, 7.
\textsuperscript{37} Wild, 90.
and lifestyle activities. It had a youth league in which young members had to prove
themselves ideologically committed and disciplined to the rigid hierarchy of the
organization. Linton Kwesi Johnson joined as a teenager and recalls how small the
membership was due mainly to how difficult it was to join, “We weren’t a large
organization…but we could mobilize hundreds.”

Two important aspects of the Black Panther Movement were its multiracial basis
and its commitment to anti-sexism. While most members were West Indian, there were
also many Asian and African members. The Black Panther Movement also collaborated
with white radical organizations, much like their US counterpart. The Panthers actively
supported (the predominately-white) striking miners and the Republican cause in Northern
Ireland. Among the black power movements in Britain at the time, only the Panthers had a
female leader, Althea Lecointe, and they considered sexism on par with racism as a means
of oppression. The Panthers promoted a lifestyle of ideological training and moral
standards. Panthers were not allowed to take drugs or be unfaithful. They were supposed
to be totally committed to the cause, which again speaks in part to their small numbers.

While the British black power movement shared many characteristics with their
American counterparts, one particular difference was the role of women. Not only did a
woman lead the Black Panther Movement, but also the movement as a whole began to
take serious stances against sexism by the early 1970s. According to Rose Wild, the British
black power movement was far more progressive on sexism than the Women’s Liberation
Movement was on racism. Like the American black power movement, and revolutionary

38 Wild, 99.
39 See for example, Chapter! The paper of the White Panther Party UK.
40 Wild, 101
41 Wild, 135.
movements generally, the British black power movement negotiated a tricky line between struggling for increased rights and dignity for all and deeply entrenched male chauvinism. Black leaders such as Michael X openly admitted to pimping white women, while Roy Sawh and Obi Egbuna disdained white women because they regarded them as the property of white men. Here, one can see the intersection of racial and gendered bigotry. On the one hand, sexually exploiting or simply insulting white women could be justified as attacking white racial superiority. On the other hand, sexism is linked to racism as a tool of capitalist oppression by dividing workers. During the National Conference on the Rights of Black People in Britain in May 1971, a jointly-sponsored event of the Black Unity and Freedom Party and the Black Panther Movement, held a session called “Black women want freedom”—Black sisters speak out.” The BUFP’s Black Women’s Action Committee wrote in the conference program:

Women must not be relegated to the role of kitchen troops, secretarial slaves (for typing, circulating addresses, or passing ashtrays) or house servants. Our women must guard against male chauvinism and arrogance, and must be allowed to participate fully in the running of the party.\(^{42}\)

Black power groups recognized the double oppression of black women, and attempted to challenge their position in their literature. The Black Liberation Front produced a pamphlet that stated black women were as oppressed by white society as black men and noted the black power movement risked losing black women to the Women’s Liberation Movement if they did not address their internal sexism.\(^{43}\)

Material sources for the Black Panther Movement are difficult to obtain. They were suspicious of outsiders and rightly feared police infiltration or suppression. They did


however produce several fortnightly publications that are still extant. The *Black People’s News Service* began publication in 1970. With a black panther and two raised-fist militants at the top of page one, it proclaims:

Black People’s News Service is meant to serve black people because the racist capitalist establishment in Britain has deliberately distorted black people’s history, had refused to give the true reason why black people are here in Britain, and are suppressing information about the day to day struggle of black people here and all over the world.\(^{44}\)

This paper was primarily an information platform focused on police brutality, black history, black cultural expression, and news related to global national liberation movements, and the activities of the Black Panther Movement. The first issue reports a four-hour demonstration outside the US Embassy in London to protest the harassment and supposed murder of US Black Panther Party leader Bobby Seal. At the demonstration, police beat protestors, and the report was written as a comparison of police brutality toward black people in Britain to that in the United States. The article goes on to expand the scope of racist violence against black people in the streets of London to the “worldwide violence of the white capitalists to maintain their economic power” over non-white populations around the world.\(^{45}\) The “white racist” British establishment gave the white minority independence in Rhodesia, South Africa, and Anguilla to continue capitalist exploitation, according to this article, in a theme that will be repeated throughout subsequent issues of *Black People’s News Service*.

Another common theme in the pages of *Black People’s News Service* was the distortion of black history for the benefit of the white ruling establishment: “the most effective way the white ruling class keeps us divided is by denying us our history and

\(^{44}\) *Black People’s News Service* N.D. ca. 1970 NEW/17/2  
culture while actively promoting their own.”46 This idea will influence other organizations and be a key aspect to the supplementary school movement discussed below. Linton Kwesi Johnson explains, “It was part of our ideology that culture and politics worked hand in glove in a culture of resistance.”47 The Panthers held regular plays, poetry readings, and concerts. Panthers went to youth centers and clubs to teach black youth about their history. Female members wore their hair in natural Afros. “Black is beautiful” did not translate into a kind of cultural nationalism, though, because the Panthers were more concerned with uniting black people to promote their rights in Britain while also rejecting capitalist exploitation at home and around the world.

From their position outside the statutory race relations organizations, radical black power organizations in the 1970s engaged in community campaigning. There were intellectuals such as CLR James or John La Rose who sought to politicize blacks into “race-class” consciousness through Marxist examinations of blacks’ position in a capitalist economy. Throughout their organizing efforts—in bookshops, cafes, social clubs, journals, meetings, and demonstrations—the rhetoric of “black struggle” or “black consciousness” predominated.48 However, while this discourse had as its goal the unification of black working-class consciousness, throughout the 1970s and 1980s the significant activities of black radicalism focused on specific events. Some of these events were the police harassment of the Mangrove Restaurant (1970), Wood Green (1976), Brixton and Harlesden (1976), Notting Hill Carnival (1976) as well as the defense campaigns for Cliff McDaniel, the Metro 4, Oval 8, and several demonstrations against racist attacks.49

46 Black Panther Movement, 6
47 Wild, 102.
48 Shukra, 38.
49 Shukra, 40-41.
Oftentimes, black journals like *Race Today* would link these events as part of a broader black working-class movement. They were correct insofar as many of these demonstrations and defense campaigns were organized and carried out by a few specific black organizations with revolutionary goals. It is to these we now turn.

*The Black Parents’ Movement*

While the *Windrush* generation mostly came as adults, by the late 1960s, Great Britain witnessed an increase in British-born black children who began entering school. Although the numbers of non-white Britons and particularly black school pupils were always a small fraction of the overall population, their presence was treated as a problem by the majoritarian authorities. The police frequently intervened in these “problems.” The Black Education Movement began as a response to prejudice against black students by white peers and teachers. Part of this movement was the rise of the Black Supplementary Schools, which in turn led to the creation of the Black Parents’ Movement (BPM) and Black Students’ Movement (BSM) as the premier grass-roots organizations of black cultural resistance and protest into the 1980s.

In March 1969, two reports by the Haringey Education Committee catalyzed the Black Education Movement. The first, “Report to the Haringey Education Committee on Comprehensive Education” proposed streaming according to academic ability, adequate resources for the large number of immigrants in the borough, ensuring standards, and addressing poor administration. This report would not have caused much of a stir except a confidential document known as “The Doulton Report” was leaked just prior. This report stated:

On a rough calculation about half the immigrants will be West Indians at 7 of the 11 schools, the significance of this being the general recognition that their I.Q.s
work out below their English contemporaries. Thus academic standards will be lower in schools where they form a large group.\textsuperscript{50}

The second report also speaks to the supposed low I.Q.s of West Indian children. Therefore, the widely perceived purpose of streaming was to put immigrant, particularly West Indian, students into lower streamed schools because of their assumed lower intelligence. From the lower streamed schools, of course, these children could only hope for low-paid, unskilled work in the future. This fed into an existing and continuing belief among West Indians in Britain that they were meant to be cheap labor underclass in perpetuity.\textsuperscript{51}

This idea of a race-based underclass forms a core part of much of the historiography about black presence in Britain. Kathleen Paul’s \textit{Whitewashing Britain} describes color prejudice as the cornerstone of “separate spheres of Britishness.” She maintains that despite the language of inclusiveness by politicians, there is a clear hierarchy in which native-born white Britons are on top and non-white “immigrants” can never be “British” in the same way.\textsuperscript{52} V.K. Edwards and Dilip Hiro write about English hostility to immigrants based upon skin color, and this hostility was so strong that even small numbers of blacks elicited widespread and chaotic responses.\textsuperscript{53} The widespread racism in the general society necessarily influenced how teachers, peers, and administrators regarded black pupils and therefore how they succeeded or not in the British school system.

\textsuperscript{50} Haringey Comprehensive Schools' Section 5 (c) 13 Jan 1969). See BEM/1/2/5. The George Padmore Institute.
\textsuperscript{52} Paul, xii and 43.
\textsuperscript{53} V.K. Edwards, \textit{The West Indian Language Issue in British Schools} (London: Routledge and Kegan, 1979), 2; Dilip Hiro, xi.
West Indian-born British educator Bernard Coard wrote the classic text on West Indian students’ schooling experience in 1971. In this short book, Coard argued that the foundational reason for West Indian failure in school was the authorities and teachers’ insistence that blacks were a “problem” and must be dealt with as if they lack intelligence. With streaming, many West Indian students ended up in the Educationally Subnormal Schools (ESN). The ESN were designed for students who received 50 – 80 on I.Q. tests. For newly arrived immigrants or West Indian parents unfamiliar with the British school system, many times the educational authorities would misplace their children into these schools. The promise made to the parents was that eventually their children would go back to the regular school, but this was almost never the case. Coard further argued that the ESNs were not the right place for West Indian children because the problem was not that they had low I.Q.s, but that there were biases in the I.Q. test detrimental to West Indians’ success. Coard and the historiography that cites him point to this overwhelming bias as a factor of why so many West Indian students ended up in ESN.

Coard argued that teachers’ expectations were already low for black students due to the social and cultural context, which had pathologized “blackness” to the point that simple child misbehavior by a black student was regarded as a sign of a bigger, essentialist “problem” with the child as a member of his or her race. In this narrative, black children were the victims of forces greater than themselves. The teachers, and broader society, ignored their potential and turned their willingness to learn into academic despair and even self-hatred. Coard was in a conversation with the work of Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968),

56 Coard, 16. According to Coard, in 1970, immigrant children made up 17 percent of school children but 34 percent of ESN students. West Indians accounted for four out of every five immigrant students in ESN (5).
who concluded that a complex relationship between teachers and students exists and that students’ achievement mirrors the expectations of the teachers. 57 According to Coard, teachers were a product of their environment, which regarded blacks as inferior to whites and less intelligent; therefore, the white teacher viewed the black student as less capable before any assessment of his or her abilities can be made. Taken together, a picture of open hostility toward black students by white teachers emerged in the British school system that fell in line with previous arguments, which stated blacks were a problem upon which society’s misfortunes could be blamed. 58

Coard further described how the black child learned that all the great men of history were white, the reading books for class will only have white characters, and that even when drawing pictures white was used for good and pure things while black was for ugly and evil things. 59 Coard related a story of how he asked one of his black students to draw a picture of Coard’s face. The child drew a near likeness except he kept Coard’s face white. When Coard asked the child to color in his face (Coard is a black man), the child screamed, “No! I can’t. I can’t do that. No. No.” Then he walked away. Later, the same child approached Coard outside and said “People are saying that you are coloured, but you aren’t, sir, are you?” Coard used this story to explain that a mental block has formed in the child’s mind so that he cannot associate a teacher he likes with the color he has been conditioned to believe to be bad. Later, Coard drew a picture of one of his West Indian students. The student was very happy with the picture until Coard began to color in the student’s face. The student pleaded, “What are you doing? You are spoiling me!”

58 E.g., Gilroy, 11 and John Solomos, Bob Findlay, Simon Jones, and Paul Gilroy, The Empire Strikes Back (CCCS, 1982), 28
59 Coard, 29.
explained he was drawing him black, like he and Coard both are, and that “Black is Beautiful.” The child calmed down until Coard began to draw the child’s hair: black, short, and very African in texture. The child jumped up and shouted, “You painted me like a golliwog!” Coard gave all these anecdotes as evidence of the damage the English school system does to black children’s self-esteem and identity. The denial of the West Indian child’s culture and identity in the classroom along with biased teachers, curriculum, and tests created a deep sense of hopelessness and inferiority within the black pupil. The literature argues this crushing of the black child’s motivation and identity was a systematic process in order to perpetuate an underclass of menial laborers to serve the white majority.61

West Indians in North London were especially active in creating alternative spaces for West Indian cultural and educational activities. The West Indian Standing Conference (WISC) was formed after the 1958 Notting Hill riots and was the main organization speaking out on behalf of West Indians. Together with the North London West Indian Association (NLWIA), they protested Harigey’s school streaming proposals. Two days after the above-cited reports were released, a meeting called by the NLWIA raised enough tension for the Harigey Council to call off implementation of streaming. The “Highgate Radicals” (Labour Party activists who also served on the Harigey Council) helped those in Harigey. Ironically, the “Highgate Radicals” were less concerned about prejudices against West Indian students than they were about keeping their own schools white.62 All the

60 According to David Pilgrim, “The Golliwog Caricature (2000),” The Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia http://www.ferris.edu/JIMCROW/golliwog/, A golliwog was a black character in late-nineteenth century children’s books that looked like a rag doll. The term “golliwog” or “wog” quickly became a racial insult for black people world-wide.
61 Coard, 34-35; Tomlinson, 69; Runnymead Trust, 58-64; Hiro, 54-55; Gilroy, 20-22.
same, this unlikely coalition succeeded in postponing streaming until the 1970 election that brought in a Labour Council who dropped the proposal.

Also in 1970, the Caribbean Education and Community Workers’ Association was founded as an organization specifically dedicated to issues of black children’s education. Founding members included John la Rose and Bernard Coard. An early activity was the creation of Emergency Schools Programmes, which sought to remove children from ESNs and set up Black Supplementary Schools. Black parents were informed of their rights regarding their children’s placement in ESNs, and efforts to ensure no student was thus placed without parental consent were established. On 9 May 1971, Bernard Coard spoke at the CECWA conference on “The Problems of West Indian Children in the Nation’s Schools,” which summarized his key points in *How the West Indian Child is Made Educationally Subnormal* (published three days earlier). At this conference, a plan was made to remove all West Indian Children from ESNs and put them in supplementary schools or place them back in mainstream schools. Black teachers were recruited to keep track of black students in ESNs, and more educational issues were promoted by the CECWA but never implemented because the scale of the proposed project.

One successful development in the north London West Indian communities, however, was the creation of the Black Supplementary Schools. As was mentioned earlier, the Black Panther Movement as well as the black power movement in Britain as a whole regarded mainstream education to be both discriminatory against black students but also

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63 George Padmore Institute, *The Black Education Movement*, collection description, [http://www.georgepadmoreinstitute.org/archive/collection/black-education-movement](http://www.georgepadmoreinstitute.org/archive/collection/black-education-movement). Coard’s book was published by New Beacon Books, which was founded by John La Rose and Sarah White in 1966 as the UK’s first independent publisher of Caribbean and Black British fiction and non-fiction. It was also the premises for black cultural and educational activities as well as being the target of firebombing in the late 1970s. In the early 1990s, it became the location for the George Padmore Institute while remaining an independent publisher and bookshop.
predicated on a racist conception of history that excluded black people and black ways of knowing. The front page of every issue of *Black People’s News Service* proclaims as much. Furthermore, a short article in the March 1970 issue argues:

> the most effective way the white ruling class keeps us divided is by denying us our history and culture and actively promoting their own...some knowledge of the true history of black people is essential for us...we will be able to organize more effectively today to fight for our liberation."  

One effective activity of black power activists was to volunteer their time as youth group leaders, cultural events curators, or teachers. In 1965-66, the first Black Supplementary Schools opened. Teachers, activists, and parents staffed these after-dinner and weekend schools. The subjects taught would be those left out during regular schooling hours such as Pan-African history and culture as well as more-focused instruction on subjects like English and math. John La Rose and others opened the George Padmore and Albertina Sylvester Black Supplementary Schools in 1969 with four students, two of them La Rose’s sons.65 Besides an education on black history, these schools strove to build up children’s self-esteem and cultural pride as fortification against the systemic and individual discrimination they faced on a daily basis.

The Black Supplementary Schools grew from the initial two schools to four schools by 1975. These schools were funded by a £1 contribution each term, and classes would begin usually about two weeks after the regular schools. At first, the Albertina Sylvester School was intended for younger children while the George Padmore School was for older students.66 Each school held regular meetings concerning curriculum, funding,

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64 *Black People’s News Service* (March 1970): p. 6 NEW/17/2  
and discussions with parents. In 1975, an incident of racially motivated police brutality against students of the George Padmore School prompted the creation of the Black Parents’ Movement alongside the already founded Black Students’ Movement. The Black Parents’ Movement began to hold regular meetings with students, teachers, and parents to discuss education and racism. This brought initial discomfort on all sides with students nervous about discussing their education in front of parents and some parents thinking their child’s time on a Saturday or evening could be better spent. However, the BPM facilitated the merging of the four to maximise their resources, and the George Padmore and Albertina Sylvester Supplementary Schools ran jointly into the early 1990s. The activist community surrounding the establishment of the supplementary schools engendered further community activism into the 1980s.

Throughout the years of the Black Education Movement, a steady stream of complaints from students about racial harassment from the police came up in meetings. After one student was arrested in 1971, the stream turned into a flood. However, the case of Cliff McDaniel catalysed the formation of the Black Students’ Movement and the Black Parents’ Movement. On 17 April 1975, Hornsey police in north London brutally beat and then charged McDaniel with assault. These two movements jointly worked together to defend black youth who were harassed and unreasonably arrested by police in and around north London. The parents, many of whom experienced British colonialism first hand in the Caribbean, and the students regarded the cases of police harassment or wrongful arrest as part of larger societal oppression of black people in Britain. The BPM particularly wanted to advance the interests of the black working class and unemployed and aligned

68 Black Parents’ Movement, “Method of Organization,” pg. 4 BPM 1/1/1
itself with the black radical and revolutionary movements that were more active years previously. It formed alliances with the Race Today Collective, the Bradford Black Collective, and expressed solidarity with the Oilfield Workers’ Trade Union in Trinidad thus establishing itself as part of a domestic and international black revolutionary movement.\footnote{69}{George Padmore Institute, The Black Parents’ Movement, collection description. http://www.georgepadmoreinstitute.org/archive/collection/black-parents-movement} 

The McDaniel case began with what was common practice: stop and search based upon the “sus” law. Sus is short for “suspected person” and dates back to Section 4 of the Vagrancy Act 1824. This law empowered the police to stop and search any person they suspected of having committed or intending to commit an arrestable offense. Given the phenomenon of the “mugging” moral panic, police racially profiled young black men especially. According to ten witnesses who testified at the High Magistrates Court on 26 June 1975, PC Ryan David stopped and searched McDaniel for no reason. PC David punched and kicked McDaniel in the face and stomach while PC McCulloch punched McDaniel in the kidneys. At the Hornsey Police Station, PC David further assaulted McDaniel, and then charged him with insulting behaviour and assault. McDaniel was found guilty and bound over for £10. The Black Parents’ Movement formed in response to this case and set to work to appeal the verdict. They employed the same barrister who won the acquittal of the Mangrove 9 \footnote{discussed below} in their appeal. The BPM won the appeal and in a subsequent case, McDaniel was found not guilty. The BPM then went on to organize the firing of PC David as well as pressured the Home Secretary to investigate police harassment and violence toward young black people.
The success of the BPM in the McDaniel case led to an increase of participation by young people in legal and political battles against discrimination. At first, friends and classmates of McDaniel showed up, but their attendance grew into regular meetings with over thirty young people in attendance. The Black Students’ Movement formed out of the George Padmore Black Supplementary School on 20 April 1975 with twenty students. The students, along with their parents and members of the Race Today Collective, developed an organizing method to defend those they saw as unjustly arrested and charged by police. The first principle was that the defendant was centrally in control of his or her case. This was due to the long-standing precedent of public defenders pressuring their clients to make plea deals not in their best interest. Outside the courthouse, the BSM would leaflet the area with information provided by the defendant explaining his or her side of the case, and these would also be sent to the police commissioner or Home Secretary. The BSM established rules for members and began recruiting at schools and colleges. Their recruitment was aided by the publication of two leaflets, “The Police and the Black Student” and “School Today, Prison Tomorrow.”

The BSM was involved in the defense of two cases of police brutality and unjust arrest against young black people in 1976. The so-called Wood Green 18 trial and the Burning Spear case. The “Wood Green Case” began with about 200 black students returning home after the North London Inter-Schools Athletic Finals on 12 May 1976. Someone threw a tin can at a passing police car, which called for backup and moved in to confront the crowd of youths. The police chased many in the crowd with truncheons and scuffles broke out all through the area. Several boys were kicked and beaten while being

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70 “How We Organize,” Black Students Movement Report BPM/1/1/2, pg. 2
71 Black Student’s Movement and Black Parents’ Movement, “Support the Wood Green 18” Press Statement, BPM/5/1/3/1

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arrested, and the police indiscriminately threw anyone they could grab into police vans. Eventually nine youths and nine adults were arrested and charged with threatening behaviour, assault, obstruction, possession of offensive weapons, and criminal damage. The BSM took the initiative to defend the eighteen. This case was not a success for the BSM: all nine adults were found guilty on various charges, and of the youth, all but three were found guilty of the charges against them. Furthermore, the BSM and BPM filed complaints with the police commissioner about police misconduct during the confrontation, but those complaints were dismissed.

The “Burning Spear Case” involved the arrest and beating of six young black women in Harlesden on 24 June 1976 after leaving the Burning Spear Club. The police confronted these women after one of them tried to defend her brother from being forced into the back of a police car. A large group gathered, leading to police using their truncheons and yelling racial abuse at the civilians. The following trial resulted in all three women being found guilty of various assault charges against the police. Although these two cases resulted in the BSM’s failure as a defense team, as an organization it was able to maintain its focus on police brutality and economic oppression of black people while continuing to champion the client-centric approach to black people’s defense against what they considered unjust charges.

The McDaniel case catalysed the creation of the Black Parents’ and Black Students’ Movements, who worked in conjunction. These two groups focused on the education, schooling, policing, housing, and (un)employment of black people in the UK, but also

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72 Black Student’s Movement and Black Parents’ Movement, “Dem Police Again,” 7 June 1976, BPM 5/1/2/1
74 “Up against the Police,” Race Today 8, nos. 7&8 July/August 1976, 148.
across the African diaspora. These were independent black radical and revolutionary organizations; they were committed to advancing the interests of black people through mass struggle and forming alliances, when possible, with other movements. They were primarily devoted to the black working class, but made efforts on behalf of the black unemployed and black middle class as well. The BPM and BSM disdained what they regarded as the “race relations industry” represented by the Community Relations Commission (later known as the Commission for Racial Equality). The statutory bodies founded after the 1976 Race Relations Act were empowered to legally constrain public displays of racial discrimination, but were seen by activists as simply managing the political fallout of racial hostility and co-opting racial black organizations through Urban Aid Grants. The reason for this animosity was by their acceptance governmental funds and oversight, the “race relations industry” most often worked to hinder the efforts of radical and revolutionary black organizations. The BPM and BSM also exposed the racial bias of the Labour Party, Socialists, and Marxist parties and unions who tended to idealize the white working-class while—in the case of the Labour Party and labor unions—actively discriminated or restricted blacks in terms of employment or immigration rights. The BPM were involved in many of the cases remembered as prime moments in the development of black consciousness and confidence over the late 1970s, and it was this organization more than any other which organized the “Black People’s Day of Action” in March 1981.

75 “Where the BPM Stands and How It Sees Britain,” BPM/1/1/1, pg. 3.
76 Ramdin, 451.
77 “Where the BPM Stands and How It Sees Britain,” BPM/1/1/1, pg. 4.
Black Britons and the Police

The violence and harassment against black people manifested in a seemingly symbiotic relationship between the state and racist private citizens. Kathleen Paul discusses how legislative action at the top trickled down into a population already suspicious and resentful, thus creating outward hostility and even violence. The Black Panther Movement focused much of its attention on the problem of black people being attacked by white racists or assaulted by police during a “sus” stop, and then being charged themselves with crimes such as Grievous Bodily Harm or Actual Bodily Harm. According to an interview with the *Sun* (cited in *Black People’s News Service*), the chief detective of H. Division in Stepney declared: “until the skinheads find a less retaliatory race, the Paki [sic] will continue to get it, in the neck, groin or head, but there is more in store if the Pakistanis carry out their threat to form Karate groups to patrol the streets.”

Here a figure of legal authority explicitly blames the immigrant for the violence perpetrated against him while also using the racial slur common among the racists. He also cites the recent phenomenon of Pakistanis, Indians, and others to form self-defence groups to protect their communities from Skinheads’ “Paki bashing” or “nigger hunting” because was clear by the 1970s that the police would not protect the immigrant communities. The Chief Detective goes on to state “this could only escalate into a civil war in the East End,” clearly articulating the magnitude of the problem while also presenting interracial violence as inevitable.

The racist violence was not inevitable, of course, but the facts were the immigrant and native-born black and Asian British faced racist violence at the same time they were painted as the cause and perpetuators of the rising crime levels in Britain. Studies conducted over the period 1945 to the 1980s provide ambivalent evidence. Some point to

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the settlement of black immigrants moving into areas such as Notting Hill, Brixton, Handsworth, and other locations with rising crime in those areas. While others show there was only a slight over-representation of immigrants in crimes against persons and lower representation of crimes against property compared to whites. The topic of black immigration and crime was debated inside and outside of Parliament, with the 1958 Notting Hill riots intensifying the discussion. During the 1950s and 1960s, the issue of black and immigrant crime was paramount in the discussions about immigration control. “Black crime” was a key argument for many pro-immigration-control advocates. The 1958 riots and other “racial tensions” were cited by MPs such as Enoch Powell and Norman Pannell to call for the deportation of “undesirables.” Also at this time, complaints from the black community about police harassment grew. The Home Office issued a circular in 1967 called The Police in Coloured Communities, which called for the creation of liaison officers in black communities with the aim to prevent the kind of racial animus between blacks and the police common in the US. The “Reports of the Commissioner of Police for the Metropolis” contained specific articles and recommendations for multiracial policing from 1970-1986. Robert Mark, then Deputy Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, wrote an article claiming there was no evidence that migrants commit a disproportionate amount of crime. He argued there were reasons they encounter the police more: small numbers of migrants involved in gambling, prostitution, and public order offenses, noisy parties, and family disputes. Finally, he

81 Solomos, Black Youth, Racism, and the State, 90.
82 Solomos, Black Youth, Racism, and the State, 91.
stated that the police serve the whole community and that they should not face any criticism.

In 1972, the next major study found about the same in metropolitan areas. Crime among West Indians was lower than expected based on where they lived. In 1972, the Select Committee on Race Relations and Immigration declared “the conclusions remain beyond doubt: coloured [sic] immigrants are no more involved in crime than others; nor are they generally more concerned in violence, prostitution, or drugs. The West Indian crime rate is much the same as that of the indigenous population. The Asian crime rate is very much lower.”83 In 1974, Scotland Yard found Asians to be arrested less often than West Indians for robbery and robbery from a person was much higher than expected for West Indian offenders.84 Lastly, there was no detectable significance for high crime areas to have large numbers of Asian or West Indian residents and no tendency for areas with high Asian or West Indian populations to have high crime rates. But, West Indians tended to live in higher crime areas than Asians.85

The Select Committee on Race Relations (1972) also found young West Indians had negative encounters with police for three main reasons: the pressure of finding housing and jobs, lack of parental discipline for teenagers, and conflict between the younger and older generations of West Indians. The Committee accepted many blacks believed they were targeted but refused to come to a solid conclusion, instead putting forward the claim that it was due to lack of communication between black communities and the police.86 The Select Committee report specifically states that black youth were too

84 Stevens and Willis, 3.
85 Stevens and Willis, 7.
sensitive to how police talk to them and responded in a way that the police perceived as insolent. Like the Chief Detective cited above, here again the voice of governmental authority basically blames the black youth for their victimization. The Committee does not say the police were racist, but instead said there was misunderstanding and called for communication training in multiracial areas. The recommendations were never met because—at the same time—police, race, and crime issues were explosively politicised, especially around the issue of “mugging.”\(^87\)

According to Stuart Hall et al. in *Policing the Crisis*, black youth were categorised as a social problem, and this formed the bedrock of the ideological focus on black youth/crime/deprivation as a political phenomenon. According to Hall, mugging was associated with black youth because they were seen as a social group that suffered the most in terms of poverty, unemployment, and social alienation in inner cities. They also suffered from being part of a “weak” culture and racial group with high levels of problems such as broken families and low achievement in school.\(^88\) Areas of the inner city which had the highest rates of poverty, poor housing, lack of jobs, broken families, and crime were also the areas with the highest percentage of black settlement, *ergo*, blacks and problems were defined together. In Hall’s assessment, “black youth,” “inner cities,” and “crime” all became synonymous in public discourse.\(^89\)

Between 1972 and 1976 the police raised the issue of black crime as a major problem. They cited an uneasy relationship between blacks and police. Powell spoke in 1976 of mugging being a specifically black immigrant crime and this raised the nature of

\(^{87}\) Solomos, *Black Youth, Racism, and the State*, 98.


\(^{89}\) Hall, 217.
discussion in public. In 1977, the Select Committee on Race Relations changed its tone saying there still wasn’t a causal link, but now concluding that young blacks were in areas of high crime in large numbers and therefore were involved in crime at higher rates. Also relevant was the number of arrests that did not result in any charges as well as encounters with police that did not end in arrest. The “sus” law was seldom used until the 1970s, and was most often used in large urban areas with significant black populations. Statistics for Metropolitan Police District (London) in 1977 show that a total of 2,366 persons were arrested for “sus” and of that 1,042 were black.\textsuperscript{90} Blacks were 14 times more likely to be arrested for “other violent theft” (e.g. purse snatching) and 15 times more likely to be arrested on “sus” than whites.\textsuperscript{91}

The unequal enforcement of the law happened in the atmosphere of Britain’s economic contraction, which also particularly affected blacks and immigrants. While the influx of immigrant labor had profitted those in economic and political power, when the economy began to decline due to decisions made by those same people, the immigrants became an easy scapegoat. It is historically inaccurate to place the blame for Britain’s economic woes on the shoulders of the immigrants: for one thing, Britain has always been a nation of immigrants; for another, the post-war Windrush immigrants and subsequent generations were called into Britain to fill a gap in its labor pool. But the true relation of economic decline and racism resulted from the concentration of immigrants into deprived and decaying areas that only further suffered from deindustrialization and social deprivation.\textsuperscript{92} The economic recession born of monetary policies, the OPEC embargo, and

\textsuperscript{91} Stevens and Willis, 33.
\textsuperscript{92} A. Sivanandan, \textit{Race, Class, and the State: The Black Experience in Britain} Race & Class pamphlet no. 1 The Institute of Race Relations, 1976, 350.
Britain’s decolonization hit manufacturing particularly hard. Birmingham, Liverpool, and London were until the 1970s the biggest industrial centers and also had the highest level of Afro-Carribean employees. When those factories folded, massive unemployment resulted. For example, in Brixton, 55 percent of black males under nineteen were unemployed and black unemployment was three times that of whites. When Lord Scarman investigated the 1981 Brixton Riots, evidence submitted to him stated “young people roaming around in the streets with nothing all day, with nothing to do and nowhere to go” would often get involved in theft, gambling, drinking, and drug dealing. Thus, contact with the police became increasingly frequent to control the social problems created out of the economic crisis.

*The Symbolic and Physical Destruction of Black Men*

In April 1969, the body of Nigerian David Oluwale was fished out of a Leeds canal. The January 1972 *Race Today* article entitled “The Death of One Lame Darkie” tells the tale of the murder of a black man by the Leeds police force simply because of his skin color. Oluwale arrived in Britain as a stowaway upon the cargo ship *Temple Star*. Educated and ambitious, he went to Britain with the hopes of becoming an engineer. Ending up in Leeds, Oluwale faced some of the most intense racial hostility of anywhere in England, yet he persisted. The Leeds police, in particular Sergeant Kenneth Kitching and Inspector Geoffrey Ellerker, began “a campaign of harrassment, brutality, and torture” according to evidence presented at the 1971 manslaughter trial of Kitching and Ellerker. Over the years of harrassment, David Oluwale became aggressive and began suffering hallucinations. He was institutionalized for eight years, released in 1961 without a job or a home. Over the

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next four years, he was arrested several times for disorderly conduct, drunkeness, and other symptomatic offenses of those who must live on the streets. In 1965, he was again committed to a mental hospital for two years. During the next two years, Oluwale was reduced to wondering the streets sick and hungry and sleeping at night in doorways wrapped in newspapers to keep out the frigid northern England air. It was in the doorways that Sergaent Kitching and Inspector Elleker especially liked to attack Oluwale.⁹⁵

Kitching and Elleker made special requests to fellow officers that if they saw Oluwale to contact them so they could handle him. In August 1968, they beat him in a shop doorway and then drove him outside of town and dumped him on the side of the road. On September 3, 1968, they again beat him in a doorway and again the next day, this time bringing him to the police station terrified and bleeding from the mouth. They charged him with assaulting the police with the help of a false entry in their duty book, sent him to prison. After Oluwale’s release, all Leeds police officers knew Oluwale as “Uggie,” “Ullie,” “Allie,” and “the Lame Darkie” and actively harrassed him, teased him, beat him, and sent for Kitching and Elleker to come take care of him if he was spotted, according to prosecutor John Cobb, QC. David Oluwale’s suffering came to an end on the night of 18 April 1969, when witnesses said they saw two police officers chasing him near the river bank. PC Keith Seager, presenting evidence at the trial, said he “heard blows beign struck” and then saw Kitching and Elleker walking away “seem[ing] quite contented with themselves.” The next day, his body was “found drown” according to the coroner’s report.⁹⁶

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⁹⁶ Mullard, 125.
It took over two years for Kitching and Elleker to be brought to trial, charged with manslaughter. PCs Seager and Cyril Batty testified against their former colleagues for the years of harassment they witnessed against Oluwale. However, in the end, Justice Hinchcliffe declared there was no evidence that anyone committed any criminal act, throwing out the manslaughter charge. Hinchcliffe went on to disparage Oluwale as “a menace to society, a nuisance to the police, [and] a frightening apparition.” Kitching and Elleker were convicted of assault against Oluwale, but Justice Hinchcliffe was more upset that they might have brought disgrace upon the force, thus solidifying the notion that this was a case of two bad apples and not of institutional racism among police. Several MPs called for an inquiry, which was rejected by Leeds Chief Constable James Angus. The Guardian published an extensive list of misdeeds by the Leeds police force from 1954-1972, including PCs running a protection racket, stealing from cars, stealing the purse of a police woman, indecent assault on boys and girls, and conspiracy to prevent justice. This vignette illustrates a cycle of marginalization and elimination perpetuated upon the black community by society and the police.

Kitching and Elleker were not aberrations. This much can be determined by the fact that a Chief Constable in Durham was quoted as saying “criminals should be quite eliminated, rather than locked away” in 1969, not to mention the support Enoch Powell gained in the late 1960s to the 1970s. Kitching and Elleker were seen by their superiors as good officers who quite reasonably were attempting to control what society regarded as an existential threat, an unemployed black man on the streets. Leeds was subjected to racial riots in July 1969, with white people shouting “Lynch them, burn them” killing one person and burning down several Pakistani owned shops. It is difficult to distinguish the causes

97 Mullard, 129.
from the reactions of a racially charged situation, but it is clear that when the police harass, control, and kill black people they are acting in a way consistent with the wishes of a society that clearly demonstrates it wants black people to just disappear.

According to Gus John, the state, police, media, and race relations experts foist collective qualities on young blacks: alienated, vicious little criminals, muggers, disenchanted, unemployed, unmarried mothers, truants, classroom wreckers, etc. Then, youth workers, social workers, etc. start from this definition and intervene accordingly. As do the police. This categorization deflects any attention to the legitimate grievances that the black youth might express about the police or racism because all authorities ascribe the problems as caused by them or their culture. There developed within the black community a widespread feeling that the police were organizing violence against them or at the very least not doing anything about it. For example, the National Front marched 500 supporters through Wolverhampton early in 1971 who shouted “Enoch Powell! Enoch Powell!” and “Sambo, your time will come!” The police stood by while this verbal abuse was hurled, but stepped in to arrest an anti-racist protester who gave a Hitler salute and shouted “Fascist Pig!” at the NF marchers. There were many incidents of an apparent double standard in policing of racial conflict as well as increased police raids upon black establishments and use of the “sus” law over the next decade. In the late 1970s, the relations between police and black youth were totally poisonous and described as open warfare. Police refused to go into problem areas, unless they were the armed Special Patrol Group

99 Mullard, 119.
100 Mullard, 119.
(SPG) to such a point that violent urban unrest was widely accepted as inevitable and perhaps necessary by some parts of the black community.\textsuperscript{101}

The Special Patrol Group (SPG) was formed in 1965 specifically to suppress public disorder. By the late 1970s, the SPG was vaster than ever and increasingly used in Greater London to carry out stop, search, and arrest campaigns, mostly on “sus.” Activists in the black power movement as well as ultra-leftist white groups specifically targeted the SPG because of its violent repression in the late 1970s, but the regular police faced significant criticism as well. In June 1971, police stopped a black man on the street for “sus.” When his friends came by to ask what was going on, the police attacked everyone with truncheons and kicked down doors to make violent and later determined illegal arrests. One man, Calvin Clayton, was in bed with an injured leg when the police broke into his house and began beating him. He defended himself with a knife until he was beaten unconscious. Later at trial, Mr. Clayton’s lawyer refused to defend him and he was sentenced to five years in prison for grievous bodily harm and attempted murder.\textsuperscript{102} Issues of Freedom News contain many stories of black men being beaten by police, especially at Brixton police station, and then being charged with assault or other crimes against the police. The problem reached such proportions that in March 1972, the Black Panther Movement organized a campaign to demand justice. Part of their organizing strategy was to hold fortnightly meetings on majority black estates, distributing leaflets, and going door-to-door to discuss grievances with neighbors.

Additionally, several cases involving police raids on black clubs or youth centers spurred the nascent Black Power Movement into action. The police would instigate a raid

\textsuperscript{101} Solomos, \textit{Black Youth, Racism, and the State}, 114.
\textsuperscript{102} Freedom News February 19, 1972. n.p.
looking for suspected drugs or illegal drinking. Afro-Caribbean culture in inner cities often centered around “shebans,” which were unlicensed drinking establishments, really little more than someone’s house with lots of cheap alcohol. At these places, black youth and adults could socialize around drinking, gambling, and dancing with less savory activities such as prostitution and drug dealing not far off. These were often subjected to police raids, as many would expect. However, between 1969 and 1970, the Mangrove Restaurant in Notting Hill was raided twelve times by police. The Mangrove was not an illegal drinking establishment, but was active in civil rights activities among the black Notting Hill population. It was the headquarters of the annual Notting Hill Carnival as well as the premises for the publication of an independent black newspaper, *The Hustler*. Patrons strongly suspected the raids were meant to close the restaurant down. In August 1970, the police arrested six protest marchers for incitement to riot and three others on other charges after a recent raid. There were 500 police officers to control about 150 demonstrators. The police stated that a banner reading “Kill the Pigs” was the basis of their case, but the magistrate declared that was not evidence of violence, so instead the nine were charged with affray. The so-called Mangrove Nine became a bit of a *cause célèbre* among black activists, and their trial resulted in acquittal for all nine; unfortunately, the restaurant was closed down the next year. One significant piece of the Mangrove Nine story was the fact that most of the defendants chose to defend themselves, overturning a long history of public defenders failing in their duty to adequately defend black defendants in British courts.

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103 Mullard, 120, 122.
The Metro Youth Club, also in Notting Hill, was raided by police on 24 May 1971. The police attempted to arrest two brothers who ran into the Metro. The patrons in the club refused to let the police enter, determined not to allow the history of harrassment continue. Eventually, the two original youth were persuaded to leave and were arrested, sparking protest from the other youth. The police responded with reinforcements and full-scale violence ensued, resulting in seventeen arrests. The trial of four of the youth began at the Old Bailey for twenty-one charges including affray, assault, and possessing offensive weapons. The national press followed the case of the “Metro 4” as an example of violent black youth attacking police, but none of the mainstream press reported that all four were found not guilty.\textsuperscript{105} In an interesting consequence, the Metro Youth Club was set to be overseen by the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) in March 1972, but the youth of the club refused to allow the ILEA appointee into the premises. They instead elected their own organizing collective and demanded the ILEA fund their activities. A long negotiation ensued which had the youth seeking an independently run club for themselves and the local authority trying to keep its activities under governmental control. The West Indian Standing Conference got involved, but within a year the Metro was demolished to build social housing.\textsuperscript{106}

As unemployment increased—and the resulting rise in deliquency, Rastafarianism, and social deprivation among black youth—so did police raids on black clubs and police stops of black youth. According the the Institute on Race Relations in 1979, police misconduct toward black youth was “an everyday occurrence, a matter of routine.”

Between January 1978 and September 1980, the SPG was used in saturation swoops in areas such as Brixton. In November 1978, 430 people were arrested on majority black housing estates. The increased presence of the SPG and the indiscriminate raids and stops, including the infamous “Operation Swamp 81” in Brixton, built the tension in the late 1970s into 1981 that resulted in the explosion of urban insurrection that year, according to most observers including Lord Scarman himself.

*The National Front and the Anti-Nazi League*

The 1970s ended in a malestrom of economic and social crises. After reaching the one million mark in 1971, the number of unemployed Britons hovered around one to one-and-half million until Thatcher’s election. High unemployment and stagnant demand combined with inflation, called stagflation, and the United Kingdom was hit particulally hard after nearly a decade of economic hits (devaluing the pound, the end of Bretton Woods, and the OPEC embargo). In 1976, James Callaghan chose to seek a loan from the International Monetary Fund that resulted in further cuts to social spending. The remaining strong unions continued to hold strikes and threaten services from transportation to heating and lighting. The so-called Winter of Discontent, 1978-1979, brought the nation to a virtual standstill as striking workers hit most sectors, with the trash not even being picked up. The atmosphere of ripe for social disorder, and in the context of racial animosity, the late 1970s were remarkably brutal.

At the forefront of racial tensions, both in terms of numbers and in the popular imagination, was the National Front. The National Front began in 1967 as a fusion of A.K. Chesterton’s League of Empire Loyalists, the British National Party, and John Tyndall’s Greater Britain Movement. The National Front began as an ethnic-nationalist party

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107 Hiro, 85.
committed to the creation of a purely white United Kingdom by forcing the end of non-white migration and compulsory repatriation of the non-white population. Additionally, the National Front espoused an extreme right-wing political viewpoint embracing fascist, neo-fascist, and neo-Nazi ideologies along with overt racism, anti-Semitism, and anti-feminism. The National Front was always a small party, it never gained a seat in Parliament; however, in the 1970s, it managed to secure several council positions and attracted widespread attention through its provocative marches and organizing activities in predominately black and Asian neighborhoods.

John Tyndall became the leader of the National Front in 1972, and attempted to make his neo-Nazi ideology seem rational and respectable. This was in the context of the “Ugandan Asian Crisis” in which the newly independent African nation of Uganda began an ethnic cleansing process by expelling Asians settled there for generations. These were mostly Indians and Pakistanis who had been in Uganda in the service of the British Empire. Due to the 1948 British Nationality Act, these people were officially “Citizens of the United Kingdom and Colonies” but as a result of the 1962 and 1968 updates of the Act, they had no right to enter the United Kingdom. Prime Minister Edward Heath allowed them to enter under a temporary liberalization of policies, which greatly inflamed the general public as well as Enoch Powell and John Tyndall. MP Powell largely succeeded in drawing the Conservatives further to right in regards to immigration, and fringe elements like the National Front also benefitted from this over the next few years. When a new crisis, that of the Malawian Asian refugees, emerged in 1976, Tyndall’s National Front capitalized on the opportunity to hold more demonstrations, increase their electoral

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presence, and in the midst of it all, ramp up their violence against racial minorities and their allies.

In June 1976, a Sikh schoolboy, Gurdip Singh Chaggar, was stabbed to death by two teenaged boys. A week later, John Kingsley Read, former chairman of the National Front, said in a speech “One down, a million to go.” Public demonstrations by Sikhs and others followed with a clash between Asian youth and white National Front supports. Southall had a large population of Asian immigrants, including many Sikhs from the Punjab. The National Front attempted to march through Southall on many occasions, being confronted and turned back by the local population. On the pop cultural front, Eric Clapton drunkenly shouted “Enoch was right!” from the stage in Birmingham early in August. On 30 August 1976, the annual Notting Hill Carnival was the scene of a large riot between mostly black and Asian youth and the police who conducted many stop and searches as well as arrests. In the violence, about 100 police were injured as well as 60 members of the public. Police made 66 arrests, but at trial only two people were convicted. This “White Riot” pushed the 1976 Race Relations Act through Parliament, which made it illegal for the first time to discriminate on the basis of race for employment, training, housing, education and the provision of goods, facilities and services. However, the racist activities of the National Front and the complacence or protection of them by the police continued despite the new law.

The National Front’s march through Lewisham in southeast London was the epitome of its spectacular inflammatory tactics, and the reaction of those opposed to their politics to take direct action. On 13 August 1977, five hundred National Front members began a march on New Cross Road with banners that read “85% of Muggers Are Black

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109 Joe Strummer and Paul Simonon were in the riots and wrote The Clash’s “White Riot” as a result.
whilst 85% of Victims Are White” and “Stop Muggers.” Approximately 4,000 counter
demonstrators met them in the streets. At first, the police escorted the National Front and
protected them from the counterdemonstrators, including police mounted on horseback.
Then, the anti-National Front groups began hurling bricks, smoke bombs, bottles, and
blocks of wood at the marchers, and the banners were seized and burned.110 When the
National Front finally made it to Lewisham Town Center, they were blocked by an
enlarged counter demonstration. Unable to continue, the National Front was escorted by
police to waiting trains and left the area. The anti-National Front groups remained and
began clashing with the police. For the first time on mainland England, the police brought
out riot shields and mounted police charged against the anti-fascists.111 Order broke down
as police lost control of the town center under a barrage of bricks and bottles. Looting and
fires broke out, and the “Battle of Lewisham” resulted in over hundred injuries and over
two hundred arrests.112

The National Front inspired and advocated violence against black and Asian
people as a method of rallying support to its cause. There were many opponents, especially
among the left-leaning youth. The Anti-Nazi League was founded in 1977 in part to
respond to the National Front’s electoral gains among the white working class as well as
the Battle of Lewisham. The League was a subgroup of the Socialist Workers’ Party and as
such was always regarded with suspicion among other anti-racist and anti-fascist

111 “1977: Violent Clashes at NF March,” BBC On This Day: 13 Aug,
http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/august/13/newsid_2534000/2534035.stm, accessed 26
February 2018.
112 Jenny Bourne, ”The Real Losers in Saturday's Battle of Lewisham”. Institute of Race Relations, 19
September 2007. Retrieved 30 November 2017; Lindsay Mackie, ”The Real Losers in Saturday's Battle of
314 New Cross Road in 2017 commemorating the beginning of the fight against the National Front. This is
just down the street from another commemorative plaque were the New Cross Fire happened in 1981, 439 New Cross Road.
organizations. However, the Anti-Nazi League was at the forefront of sustained opposition against the National Front attempting to establish headquarters in minority neighborhoods such as Hackney and Tower Hamlets. Furthermore, the Anti-Nazi League created Rock against Racism, which brought the energy and political awareness of punk and reggae—white and black working class—together on stage in a show of unity and resistance toward racism. The pressure of the Anti-Nazi League (including no doubt the popularity of RAR among young fans) managed to discredit and isolate the National Front by adamantly declaring it to be a Nazi political organization. In 1978, the murders of Altab Ali and Ishaque Ali by National Front supporters heightened the opposition to the National Front, especially by established Asian organization in London’s East End.

The East End of London was a traditionally high crime area, but in the late 1970s, the attacks on the local Bengalese, Sikh, Indian, and Pakistani community were at a much larger scale than any other group. Racist skinheads had engaged in “Paki Bashing” since the early 1970s, but the enlarged National Front (they fielded 303 candidates for Parliament in 1979) resulted in a nearly open season on Asians. Daily occurrences of harassment, intimidation, and violence were punctuated by periodic deadly assaults. Of significance in this area was the lack of police protection against attacks. One example was in April 1977 when five or six white youths attacked four members of the Virk family. The Virks defended themselves and the police arrived, and arrested the Virks. The white youths were members of National Front-aligned organizations and shouted racial abuse during the attack, but that evidence was excluded by the judge. The Virks were sentenced to three to seven years.\(^{113}\) The death of Michael Ferreira at the hands of two white youth who shouted National Front slogans during the attack, resulted in both receiving five year sentences.

\(^{113}\) Steering Committee of Asian Organizations, “Release the Virks,” (n.p., n.d.)
Deaths and attacks became so frequent, the Hackney Black People’s Defence Organization, East London Anti-Nazi League, and Steering Committee of Asian Organizations against Racism developed coordinated programs. These included documenting and reporting racial incidents and mobilizing the black and Asian communities through leafletting at markets, going door-to-door, forming youth groups, holding regular public meetings, and teaching self-defence classes.\textsuperscript{114} The Bethnal Green and Stepney Trades Council produced a book, \textit{Blood on the Streets}, in 1978 documenting the 130 racist attacks in the East End over the roughly two years 1976-1978.\\n
\textit{The Black Uprising}\\n
The pressures exerted upon Britain’s racial minority population for over a decade came to an explosive climax in the early 1980s. This had been predicted since Enoch Powell’s 1968 “Rivers of Blood” speech, but also in less inflammatory, but no less stark terms, by politicians, journalists, and social commentators throughout the 1970s.\textsuperscript{115} The National Front ran for three hundred seats in Parliament during the 1979 general election. Powell and the NF had pulled national politics so far to the right in regards to immigration and repatriation that Thatcher was freed to come out strongly on race and immigration yet still be perceived as adhering to a moderate “common sense racism.” The vitriol of Powell and the fascists made Thatcher’s own racism and racist immigration plans seem more palpable to the wider public. In a January 1978 interview on \textit{World in Action}, Thatcher infamously spoke about the nation’s fears of being “rather swamped by people with a different culture” in regards to the black and Asian presence in Britain at the time.\textsuperscript{116}\\n
Thatcher, Powell, and the National Front all spoke of the threat of the black
presence in terms of numbers, and they were aided by the national press. The *Daily Mail*
quoted Thatcher as claiming one in four children born in Britain was non-white; the paper
only reported the true figure, one in fourteen, deep in the inside pages. A Gallop/BBC poll
found a majority of Britons thought there were ten million black people in Britain; the true
number was 1.9 million in 1977.\(^{117}\) The debate about race and immigration tended to be
about numbers, and the numbers cited were almost invariably wrong. These misguided
assumptions carried into the early 1980s with the *Times* finding in late 1981 that 39 percent
of Britons thought there were over ten million “coloured people” in Britain and that there
were “waves and waves” of more coming in.\(^{118}\) Thatcher sought to destroy the gains of the
working class, curb the power of unions, and do away with the welfare state. Her public
pronouncements demonizing an alien culture fit neatly into a long-standing pattern of
using race to splinter the working class. While both major parties exploited racial fears for
political gain, and both parties enacted clearly racist nationality and immigration laws, the
early Thatcher years set fire to the racial kindling that had been piling up for decades,
particularly with regards to increased policing of minority communities.

The race riots in the St. Paul’s district of Bristol on 2 April 1980 were widely
regarded as a preview of the unrest to come. Once again, police conducted a raid on a
black-owned business, ostensibly looking for illegal drinking. St. Paul’s was a powder keg of
inner city tension. The M32 motorway split the district. Housing and education for the
white and black working class was substandard. The National Front had a strong

\(^{117}\) Socialist Worker Pocket Pamphlet no. 6 *The Case Against Immigration Controls*, 1978, citing the *Times* 5
September 1977.

Limited, 1984), 114.
St. Paul’s, like many inner city districts, was under heavy use the “sus” laws. So, when police raided the Black and White Café, the youths present fought back with a fury that lasted several hours. The *Guardian* reported 100-200 people rioted, while the *Bristol Post* put the number at 2,000. What is clear is that this riot got the attention of the national authorities: the House of Commons held a session on it, and Home Secretary Whitelaw came to the city. Bristol remained tense throughout the 1980s.

Back in London, the Deptford district of south London was a hotbed of racial violence. Since the 1977 Battle of Lewisham, the National Front and other racists continued to attack black and Asian Britons in southeast London. Just prior to the January 1981 fire that killed thirteen partygoers on New Cross Road, several black people’s cars had been torched, and years earlier an Indian party was burned down, injuring many. When the fire broke out at Yvonne Ruddock’s birthday party, those present immediately believed it was just another racist attack. Given the history of the preceding decade discussed above, why wouldn’t they? However, the police presented different versions of events from saying there was a fight at the party to there were gatecrashers who started the fire. The press, especially *The Daily Mail*, contributed to the contradictions and confusion around the tragedy by erroneously reporting that several black youths had been arrested as the ones who started the fire. Over the next two months, the police and press changed their stories all while denying the declarations of the victims families that this was a

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deliberate racist attack, including dismissing the claims by several witnesses that they saw a
white man throw an object into the window just prior to the blaze starting. Margaret
Thatcher refused to comment on the fire until five weeks later, in what many regarded as a
cynical political move, while MP Jill Knight of Birmingham quite clearly blamed the fire on
the victims by suggesting it was West Indians’ loud parties that were the real problem.\textsuperscript{123}
Many of the victims’ families received gloating, racist letters in the weeks after the
tragedy.\textsuperscript{124}

The New Cross Massacre Action Committee formed immediately after the fire, led
by John La Rose and others who had long been involved in black community organizing.
The key push of the committee was of course to raise awareness of the tragedy—both the
mainstream press and politicians hardly discussed it for weeks, while the alternative press
gave wide coverage to it. The committee also pressed for an inquiry into the fire, which
was finally held in April and May 1981 with many irregularities that ended in an open
verdict.\textsuperscript{125} Interestingly, the New Cross Massacre Action Committee also pushed for a
rejection of the 1981 British Nationality Act. This Act for the first time established a
British citizenship, which abolished completely the right of Commonwealth citizens to
register for British citizenship and took away guaranteed civic rights for those already
settled in Britain.\textsuperscript{126} The violence, legal restriction, “sus,” and marginalizing of black
people’s plight were all significant factors that brought 20,000-25,000 people to the 2
March 1981 “Black Peoples’ Day of Action.” The march had a heavy police presence,
especially as it left south London and crossed into Fleet Street. Clashes broke out on

\textsuperscript{123} Declaration of New Cross, 1981, Made at the New Cross Massacre Black People’s Day of Action, 2
March 1981.
\textsuperscript{125} The New Cross Fire has never been solved. New inquests have been held, but the verdict is still open,
meaning there is no official version of events and no one has been charged or punished.
\textsuperscript{126} British Nationality Act 1981; “The Nationality Bill and New Cross Massacre”
Blackfriar’s Bridge between marchers and police. This the national press did report, probably because it happened right outside their offices. The Sun shouted “Riots and Looting as Marchers Run Wild” on its front page while the Daily Express declared it a “Rampage of a Mob.” The fact that only about 200 protestors engaged in any kind of violence that injured little over a dozen police in a march of over 20,000 people that went for eight hours and travelled seventeen miles is remarkable and speaks to the planning and discipline of the New Cross Massacre Action Committee.

There was reasonable speculation that the government’s refusal to listen to the grievances of black people caused the violent insurrection in Brixton in April and across England in July. On 2 March 1981, John La Rose sent letters and requests for meetings with the Prime Minister, Home Secretary, Speaker of the House of Commons, and Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police: all to no avail. The slogan “thirteen dead, nothing said” came on the heels of decades of being ignored when black people held marches, wrote letters, published articles, or otherwise tried to peacefully voice their grievances. The police launched Operation “Swamp ‘81” two weeks after the march. Swamp ’81 was the culmination of over two years of increased policing, including by the SPG, in Lambeth. There were 1,000 arrests in the first ten days of April, mainly of young black men due to “sus.” Lambeth, the borough that contains Brixton, had the highest number of arrests under “sus” of anywhere in London, 75 percent of those arrested were black. Brixton had all the classic problems of inner cities—bad housing, high unemployment, no recreation facilities—plus heavy police presence. Due to “sus” and Swamp ’81, the police were seen as an occupying army, and since at least 1978, the

Lambeth Council under Ted Knight predicted a massive backlash against the police if they did not ease up on the black population of Brixton.

As has been demonstrated, there were bad relations between the police and black communities for at least twenty years leading up to Brixton 1981. Paul Gilroy relates that during a Police Federation seminar in Oxford, a police superintendent stated, “police must be prejudiced if they are to do their job properly.” More importantly, Gilroy argues racist police matter less than the institutional theory of black criminality among police.129 According to evidence submitted by the Institute of Race Relations to the Royal Commission on Criminal Procedure, the police were no longer enforcers of public morality, but were recreators of it; they stereotyped blacks as criminals and “muggers” and used the law to repress a whole population.130 In addition to police oppression, the black community faced deadly attacks from racists and fascists, who were sometimes protected by or were the police themselves. In the years 1976 to 1981, thirty-one black people were murdered by racists in Britain. There were well-known murders—Gurdip Singh Chaggar, Altab Ali, Michael Ferreira—as well as fatal arson attacks, including an elderly Sikh woman burnt to death in Leeds and, of course, the thirteen victims of New Cross. Petrol-soaked rags pushed through letter boxes and set alight were so common many black families kept water buckets near their front doors.131 Yet, as with the case of the Virks, Bradford 12, and others, when black people fought back because the police failed to protect them, it was the victims of attack who were arrested and charged. This marginalization and perceived injustice would explode into uprisings in the spring and summer of 1981. At the time, the

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130 Fryer, 393.
131 Fryer, 396.
establishment suggested it was outside agitators who tried to stir up hitherto non-existent racial animosity between the black community and the police for anti-social causes. As this chapter has demonstrated, the grievances were certainly real and the agitation clearly came from within the black community.

**Conclusion**

The radical activism of the black British population after the Second World War built itself up over the course of many events and through many outlets. This chapter examined a series of demonstrations and legal defense campaigns that emerged in response to both specific and systemic racist discrimination, harassment, and violence. While one cannot speak of the “radical black British movement” in any unified sense, all the different groups covered by this study followed an ideal of grassroots, independent, community organizing to address the issues with which they were particularly concerned. Beginning in the early 1970s, black power ideology permeated diverse organizations from the Black Panther Movement to the New Cross Massacre Action Committee. Additionally, a black-focused reform of the educational system in Britain grew up in small, localized parent-teacher-student groups while both categories of activists inevitably engaged in anti-racist actions. This latter segment of radical black activism was represented in mobilizing demonstrations against racist police or the National Front as well as in the direct physical confrontation with racists and fascists on the streets by the Anti-Nazi League or Hackney Black People’s Defence Organization. Large street demonstrations could be mobilized by a small core of regular activists as well as solidarity and support for those who acted independently.

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The independent black community organizations all rejected their prescribed inferiority and asserted their black cultural agency while differing along lines of Marxist analysis of capitalism, justification of violence, and their relationship with white or Asian radicals. It was out of this simmering pot of black activism and racial hostility from white society that established long-term and successful points of struggle in education, self-defense (on the streets and in the courts), and in creating a robust black working-class consciousness that shaped the responses to public and official racism in the late-1970s and early 1980s. The politicized black voice of the “Black People’s Day of Action” was one expression of this longer-term black struggle. The petrol bombs, broken glass, and smashed police cars of Brixton 1981 and 1985 were another. If 1981 was indeed a turning point in black Britons’ political consciousness, then the daily and yearly build up of that identity and voice were its historical roots.
Epilogue

“If the past teaches us anything it is this: if the people want a better future, we can, and must create it ourselves.”1

---Selina Todd, 2014

There has much discussion about the working class in recent years.2 I conceived, researched, and wrote this project in the year and a half leading up to and the year following the election of Donald Trump in the United States and the so-called Brexit vote in the United Kingdom. The working class, and especially the white working class, seemed to be getting more commentary in the news and in academia than was usual: most of it negative. Educated, elite opinion seemed to regard the white working class as some kind of inexplicable enigma that held onto backwards beliefs, supported policies against its own best interest, or fell into some variety of “deplorables.” Indeed, the sins of the white working class in both countries deserve serious scrutiny and at times the strongest condemnation, both currently and historically. Nonetheless, scrutiny or condemnation should not come entirely at the expense of understanding.

What seemed to be lacking in recent analysis were positive assessments of working class life or working class contributions to society. My project was not an attempt to reverse the tide of negative portrayals and stereotypes of the modern underclass in either Britain or the United States. I wanted, however, to illustrate the ways in which the English working class could maintain significant characteristics of their culture, support themselves

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and their community, and endeavor to meet new challenges as they encountered them.

They did this in the context of massive deindustrialization and unemployment, changes in family structure and gender roles, post-colonial immigration, and the national loss of world power status. Great Britain during the period between 1968 and 1985 was in an “ungovernable” “decline”: three-day weeks, deadly racial violence, “the Troubles,” “mugging,” and near civil war between the government and organized labor. Yet, some segments of the working class organized together for communal mutual aid, staged massive demonstrations against the government and police, and expressed solidarity and support across lines of gender, race, or occupation. These activists were radical instead of reactionary. They desired stronger communities and believed that together they could secure a more just and harmonious future. In all the current interest in the working class, this narrative should not be forgotten.

Deindustrialization and unemployment were the constant background for the activists examined in this project. Changes in global capitalism from ending the gold standard, outsourcing manufacturing to the third world, and rolling back Keynesianism combined with the OPEC oil embargo and decolonization to shatter the postwar “golden age” of full employment and robust public spending. With the exception of Women’s Aid, none of the groups analyzed would have gained the significance they did without the combined effects of economic crisis and post-colonial immigration. Even the plight of battered women was exasperated by the contraction of British economics and welfare spending. Moreover, the activism of each group grew out of responses to acute moments during long-standing problems, which eventually became recognized as crises. The welfare state could never adequately provide housing or safety net income. Social, cultural, and legal norms kept women in subordination to such an extent that marital violence was a
likely and generally accepted outcome. Additionally, the racism and cultural chauvinism that justified and nurtured the British Empire fed into the disproportionately negative response to the arrival and settlement of a tiny population of non-white “colonials” after the Second World War. Finally, material and cultural factors created a situation where the authorities did not alleviate crises that affected a substantial segment of the population, so some took charge of their experiences as best they could.

After economic superstructures, the next significant conflict zone for the groups analyzed was a seemingly indifferent or hostile bureaucracy. Often times, the source materials related to squatters, claimants, battered women, or black Britons refer to the institutions that were legally mandated to help them; they either refused to or further contributed to the problem. Chapter one explores the many laws, agencies, and political priorities that got in the way of keeping individuals and families in decent housing and off the streets. The squatting movement developed primarily as a response to the simple fact of the statutory authorities not housing those in need. The more radical and utopian squatters grew out of this more mundane and basic requirement for living.

The claimants’ unions were also concerned with the inability of the welfare state to meet basic needs. “Entitlement” is sometimes thrown around like a dirty word. The negative connotation is people feel they are entitled to something they have not earned. However, welfare state benefits came either from contributions taken out of a worker’s pay packet (National Insurance) or out of general taxation (Supplementary Benefits). In other words, the welfare had already been paid for. What the claimants’ unions found was this system was inadequate to meet its stated goals and therefore those in most need were forced to contend with limited service and a widespread hostility against them for trying to seek the help they had been promised. Besides demanding a more generous and easier to
access system—that the CUs intended to take over and control themselves—the claimants’ revolutionary rhetoric relied on the less controversial notion that capitalism itself with the assistance of the existing welfare state created and needed poverty and unemployment in order to maintain the profits of the few. The CUs’ direct action to access benefits formed a core of their overall plans for anti-capitalist revolution.

Chapters three and four were conceived as case studies of specific activities within the broader concept of working-class direct action. Whereas the squatters and claimants challenged more general crises (i.e., everyone needs a place to live and a means of living), the analysis of battered women’s shelters and independent radical black activism covers a necessarily smaller portion of the class. However, the actions contained within the last two chapters confronted many of the same structural problems: bureaucracy, public indifference or hostility, and police misdeeds. In the last case, battered women often felt the police failed to protect them while black Britons would have considered the police to be their most immediate source of danger.

The historical context of the Women’s Aid refuges was the second wave of feminism. The women’s movement was successful in pressuring the government to pass protective and anti-discrimination legislation, but Women’s Aid went further by linking women’s historic subordination to domestic violence. Women’s Aid considered legal and police intervention to be of limited value if women were subjected to violence in their home. Therefore, their direct action response took the step of providing abused women with a safe place to possibly access new and emerging legal remedies to their unhappy marriages. The significance of the Women’s Aid movement was its combined critique of marital violence and its advocacy for greater female emancipation, especially equal pay or a
universal minimum income. These two aspects, together with a safe place to escape violence, formed their main challenge to women’s oppression.

The radical black Britons shared with the other groups analyzed a commitment to grassroots, community-based, direct action organizing while relying to an even greater extent on the use of massive demonstrations as well as violent insurrection. Among the different black activist groups, black power, anti-racism and anti-police brutality as well as black cultural and political education linked each group into a historic phenomenon. The violence of the late-1970s and early-1980s exploded as a well-predicted outcome to the history of colonialism and domestic racism, exclusionary immigration legislation, employment practices, housing, and education. Black and Asian Britons had been organizing for decades against these discriminatory practices before the violence of the 1980s. Chapter four attempted to chart the development of a radical black British political consciousness by focusing prominent organizations and several significant demonstrations and legal cases. In all of these, the community-based direct action took center stage as a powerful organizing principle that often succeeded in the immediate term.

One of the main motivating factors of this project was to analyze anarchic direct action in historical movements. Following E.P. Thompson, I tried to understand why “their aspirations were valid in terms of their own experience.”\(^3\) I also tried to illuminate how the new social movements I analyzed were part of the post-industrial “remaking” of the English working class. This attempt resulted in shortcomings that I hope future research can remedy. The first is the focus on what could be considered “anarchic direct action” meant the glossing over or ignoring the great history of British organized labor. During the period I analyzed, from the 1972 and 1974 miners’ strikes that brought down

the Heath government to the defeat of the miners in 1985, militant unionism was still a core of working-class strength and identity. I chose to not look at top-down bureaucratic organizations; however, there is surely a history to written about wildcat strikes, shop floor direct action, and conflicts between rank-and-file unionists and their union bosses.

Relatedly, this project did not address the massive history of Asian industrial militancy, which existed from at least the 1930s well into my period. Moreover, the unionization and problems of the white-collar working class received almost no attention in this project except in terms of their solidarity with the claimants’ unions. More research there is needed.

In addition to sidestepping traditional subject matter for a working-class history, my project also neglected two groups in particular: people with disabilities and homosexuals. Both of these groups of people gained social and academic recognition beginning in the 1970s in Britain, yet they were mostly absent from the sources I studied. Moreover, there is a large and growing historiography about activism within the disabled and homosexual communities, with which I regret to say I am mostly unfamiliar. I would not have felt qualified to analyze disabled people’s interaction with the welfare state or how housing, welfare, or domestic violence affected Britain’s gays and lesbians. The claimants’ unions almost certainly were involved with assisting people with disabilities, though I found no mention in their sources. The broader Women’s Liberation Movement engaged in different debates about lesbianism, but Women’s Aid in particular does not refer to it. Perhaps they just didn’t think to include them in the time period. However, after laying down the historical and theoretical framework I have with this work, I hope to one day fill that gap in my knowledge.
Lastly, this project strove to take an explicitly anarchist reading of working-class direct action during Britain’s post-industrial and post-colonial period. This involved foregrounding what I thought were clearly anarchic practices such as horizontal organizing structures, direct democracy, mutual aid, and voluntary associations among the different groups I studied. With the exception of some of the claimants and squatters, none of the source material spends any time discussing anarchist theory or identifying themselves as anarchists. Therefore, this project took some liberties of applying anarchist theory from Peter Kropotkin, Colin Ward, David Graeber, and James Scott to the activities of each group as a way to understand their motivations and goals. The squatters and claimants together most directly demonstrated the concept of creating alternative structures outside the purview and control of the state. The more radical squatters believed that the fight over housing rights was the most practical and direct way to create an actually existing alternative to capitalism and market forces. Meanwhile, the most radical of the claimants were pushing for a basic minimum income that was controlled and dispersed by claimants and workers themselves. In both cases, the present organizing means were meant to reflect as much as possible the future goals—building utopia in the shell of the current world.

The Women’s Aid movement came out most strongly against coercion and violence, seeing domestic abuse as the direct consequence of male dominance over women throughout history. In the theory of anarchism utilized for this project, the establishment and maintenance of control through violent force is anathema to liberty and dignity from the state level down to the interpersonal relationship. However, opposing coercive violence does not make one an anarchist. My inclusion of this movement in my theoretical conception of anarchism owes much to its organizing characteristics. These include the federated nature of the national organization, the refusal to take governmental funding if
that meant turning away from core principles (such as the open door policy), and the expectation that all women in the refuges had equal say in the running of the refuges and equal responsibilities to its upkeep and continuity. The commitment to delegitimizing patriarchal violence and direct action mutual aid are the anarchic aspects of Women’s Aid that I found most intriguing.

Finally, the black British activists that I analyzed most clearly demonstrated mass mobilization against ingrained racism, colonial oppression, and coercive violence. As an unwanted minority, black Britons faced exclusionary legislation regarding their immigration and presence in Britain. If they overcame the hurdles to settle in Britain, they then faced exclusion from housing, work, education, leisure, and at times safety or protection from the police. The black activists in the Black Parents Movement and Black Students Movement demonstrated how voluntary mutual aid could raise political consciousness and organize for communal defense outside the confines of statutory organizations or governmental funding. In many cases, the most immediate threat to black Britons was the state itself in the form of police misconduct or brutality. Sometimes, the black British activists responded by using the courts or public opinion against the police. But in cases such as St. Paul’s or Brixton, black Britons responded to violence with violence. Whether organized for cultural education or community self-defense, the black British activists analyzed in this project took the concepts of mutual aid, solidarity, alternative structures, and opposition to the coercive nature of the state the furthest.

Writing a history about the decades immediately preceding one’s birth is fraught with potential risks. For one, the official, archival source materials historians usually rely on tend to be unavailable. However, these issues are a less significant problem for the historian of grassroots activism. The majority of source material analyzed are pamphlets,
newsletters, independently produced guidebooks, and alternative newspapers. Instead, this work tackles a different set of problems. Primarily, most of the people examined are still alive, and thus the pressure to “get things right” seems more pronounced than if this were a history of a more remote past. My hope is if someone who was there reads this, they find my assessment fair. However, this is not only a recent history, but one that focuses on historical misfits and naïve radicals. Their voices in the large chronological scale rarely enter academic historiography. The ideals expressed in the sources I analyze seem to have been eroded by today’s world, although they sometimes reappear among increasing numbers of young people and they never went away for some. What motivated this project was a long-standing interest in grass roots, decentralized radical activism in the context of larger structural and global events. I hope by bringing these “utopian” or “deluded” voices from the past into the present, the world they envisioned might still happen. The four topics of this project—housing rights, welfare rights, domestic violence, and anti-racism—are examined in their historical context, but that should not detract from their very real presence in our current world both in the United Kingdom and in elsewhere. While this is a work of history, the tragedies discussed have not been left in the past; neither have the successes.

The period roughly between 1968 and 1985 witnessed extremes of a former world power going through stages of decay: mass unemployment, militant conflict between labor and government, racial and sectional violence, mugging, and scroungers. Yet, as the four different groups analyzed have shown, a tradition of working-class solidarity and direct action mutualism was able to secure for some the continuation of the postwar golden age as well as mount a challenge to the processes of decline and the forces of neoliberalism. Small groups of autonomous activists who banded together for support, defence, advocacy
and resources marked the clearest indication of working-class evolution and the survival of a progressive moral order in spite of the contractions and hardships all around. Under the threat of deindustrialization and unemployment, demographic and political changes, the English working class persevered while making itself anew, renewing in the process the concepts of struggle and class consciousness that should continue to inform the historiography of class, activism, politics, and social relations.
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