Britain’s newspaper headlines made for stark reading in July 1981. As a series of riots broke out across the country’s inner-cities, The Sun led with reports of ‘Race Fury’ and ‘Mob Rule’, opening up to provide daily updates of ‘Burning Britain’ as the month drew on. The Daily Mail, keen as always to pander a prejudice, described the disorder as a ‘Black War on Police’, bemoaning years of ‘spARING the rod’ and quoting those who blamed the riots on a ‘vociferous immigration lobby’ that sought ‘excuses all the time for the excesses of the blacks’. The Daily Express wrote of a ‘permissive whirlwind’ wreaking havoc; the Daily Mirror combined coverage of ‘Riot Mobs’ with condemnation of a Tory government that failed to recognize ‘real, deep and dangerous problems’ rooted in housing, education and unemployment. Britain was ‘close to anarchy’, the Mirror insisted, as it juxtaposed images of battered police and broken windows with a message to Margaret Thatcher: ‘Save Our Cities’.

Of course, the riots of 1981 did not occur in a vacuum. Nor did they mark the beginning or culmination of any coordinated social protest. Rather, the violence that gripped Britain’s inner-cites – from Bristol in 1980 through London to Birmingham, Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, Newcastle and beyond in 1981 – was but a spectacular expression of tensions that had long-simmered in communities affected by processes of structural and socio-economic change. Indeed, the problems of the 1970s are well-known: economic instability, industrial conflict, war in Ireland extending to mainland bombings and a sense of crisis embedded in political and media discourses that moved from optimism to declinism as the decade wore on. Violence on the picket lines, the
Notting Hill carnival riot of 1976 and irregular clashes between the far-right National Front (NF), anti-fascists and police formed part of a continuum of disorder. But the 1980s were just as tumultuous.\textsuperscript{7} For all the talk of Britain being reinvented as a financial centre geared towards the interests of the entrepreneur, Thatcher's premiership was book-ended by recession and disfigured by fierce industrial struggles and social unrest that culminated in the poll tax riots of 1990. Most disastrously, unemployment became endemic, having remained relatively low for much of the post-war period. The number of people out of work pushed towards three million in 1981 (12.4 per cent), before peaking at close to three-and-a-half million and remaining high thereafter.\textsuperscript{8}

The young working class were particularly vulnerable to the changes effected over the 1980s. Government policies designed to eschew commitment to full employment in favour of controlling the money supply and ‘freeing’ the market from state intervention and trade unionism ensured many were caught in a toxic combination of deindustrialization, economic depression and political brinkmanship. Britain’s black population suffered disproportionately, fuelling already-strained relations with local police forces riddled with racism.\textsuperscript{9} Put together, youthful frustration, social disadvantage and racial tension coalesced to foment a period of unrest that scarred the landscape of the Conservatives’ promised ‘new beginning’.\textsuperscript{10}

This chapter concentrates on a cultural context of the 1981 riots. More specifically, it looks at the diverse ways by which British punk’s influence dispersed into the new decade, suggesting its cultural processes continued to provide for pertinent social and political commentary even after its ‘moment’ was deemed by many to have passed. Of course, equal attention could be given to other cultural forms and to other mediums.\textsuperscript{11} Reggae, for example, had long charted the pressures seething in Britain’s inner cities, with Linton Kwesi Johnson (‘D Great Insohreckshan’), Benjamin Zephaniah (‘Riot in Progress’) and the MCs Roy Rankin and Raymond Napthali (‘Brixton Incident’) producing notable responses to the turmoil of 1980–81.\textsuperscript{12} Punk, however, is examined here for the claims often made by its protagonists: namely, that it offered a cultural form relevant to and engaged with the world of which it was a part.\textsuperscript{13}

**Punk is dead/punk’s not dead**

Defining ‘punk’ – be it in a cultural or a political sense – is contentious and problematical. In the UK, at least, punk’s meaning was constructed