

The 80s: Photographing Britain—Through the prism of identity politics

Exhibition runs until May 5, 2025 at the Tate Britain, London

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The current exhibition at Tate Britain—*The 80s: Photographing Britain*—contains many evocative images produced by “a diverse community of photographers, collectives and publications—creating radical responses to the turbulent Thatcher years,” the period 1979 to 1990 when Margaret Thatcher was Conservative Party Prime Minister.

The curators describe the 1980s as “one of the UK’s most critical decades” in which photography became “a tool for social change”. But for them this is expressed in the rise of identity politics and depicted in the preponderance of images related to “the Black arts movement, queer experience, South Asian diaspora and the representation of women in photography”.

The curators’ narrative and lack of a class perspective provides no axis for understanding the decade, which was characterised, above all, by the abandonment and betrayal of radicalised sections of the working class and youth by all the old “labour movement” organisations—the Labour and trade union bureaucracies, the Stalinists and pseudo-left groups.

The response of the unions and the Labour Party to Thatcher’s attempts to arrest the historic decline in British capitalism and “roll back” socialism through union-busting, attacks on the welfare state and an aggressive assertion of imperialist interests was “the emergence of what came to be known as ‘new realism’—an end to what were derided as out-dated notions of class struggle and workers’ solidarity, and the embrace of free-market nostrums.” (*The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Britain)*).

A major ideological role was played by the *Marxism Today* faction of the Communist Party of Great Britain, which proclaimed, in the words of historian Eric Hobsbawm, “the forward march of labour halted”, urging the Labour Party to embrace “identity politics” and consumerism in order to emulate Thatcher’s new “radicalism” and appeal to the aspiring middle class. They provided the ideological template and some of the personnel involved in the New Labour project led by Tony Blair, which Thatcher called her greatest achievement.

The Labour Party, under the nominally “left” leadership of Michael Foot, propped up the despised Thatcher regime by supporting the Falklands/Malvinas War, securing its re-election in 1983. There is no mention in the exhibition of Thatcher’s bloody campaign to secure British imperialism’s control of the islands,

her allowing Irish Republican prisoners in Northern Ireland to starve to death or her fanatical support for the fascist Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet and the apartheid regime in South Africa.

The radicalisation sweeping through Britain is evident in the first room. There are memorable black and white photographs from the Grunwick dispute, the fight against racism; the 1984-85 miners’ strike; the Greenham Common peace camp; the Gay Rights movement; and the Anti-Poll Tax campaign. Images of bands (Misty in Roots) and musicians (Paul Simonon of The Clash) taken by Syd Shelton show the level of political involvement and left-wing sentiment in the cultural world.

Also on display are magazines including *Format*, *Camerawork*, *Ten-8* and *Network* produced by photographers who sought to work collectively and independently of the mainstream media.

An example of how an identity politics narrative dominates the exhibition is the first photograph—David Mansell’s image of South Asian migrant worker Jayaben Desai, who walked out of the Grunwick Film Processing Laboratories in Willesden, London in 1976 in protest against sweatshop conditions sparking a strike.

In the accompanying text, the curators talk of Jayaben’s role as “an activist whose intersecting identities were the root of her cause” emphasising her gender and race. The photo selected shows Jayaben as a lone brave woman of colour confronting ranks of white policemen.

Nothing is said of the class roots of the dispute, the support from the population of Willesden, still then a mostly poor white working class London suburb or the mass pickets of workers from around the country brutally attacked by the Metropolitan Police counter-terrorism Special Patrol Group (SPG) sent in by the Callaghan Labour government.

We are not told how the Anglo-Indian Grunwick owner George Ward, the son of a wealthy accountant, had the political backing of Thatcher, or how her sidekick Keith Joseph called the dispute a “make-or-break point” in which the working class had to lose, otherwise a victory would represent “all our tomorrows.”

In the end, the union leadership rescued the ruling elite. When Jayaben and fellow strikers refused to call off their hunger strike outside the Trades Union Congress (TUC) headquarters, their strike pay was suspended. For months they continued, finally announcing the end of the dispute after two years in July 1978.

They remained sacked.

Following the Grunwick defeat, the full extent of the rightward capitulation of the “Labour Movement” was revealed during the bitter year-long miners’ strike depicted in the Battle of Orgreave photographs of John Harris and Brenda Prince. The scab Union of Democratic Mineworkers (UDM)—set up in collaboration with National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) bureaucrats in Nottingham—and the Labour Party and the TUC isolated the miners, refusing throughout to organise a single solidarity strike while NUM leader Arthur Scargill never politically challenged the TUC and Labour leaders.

The entire “left” went along with this treachery. The Greater London Council led by Ken Livingstone and the Militant-controlled Liverpool City Council, also under attack by the Tory government, refused to link up with the miners. The politically degenerated Workers Revolutionary Party deepened its political relations with Livingstone and other elements of the Labour left and trade union bureaucracy, offering to place the entire resources of the WRP at his disposal.

The exhibition also shows images of the Anti-Nazi League launched in 1977 by the pseudo-left Socialist Workers Party (SWP). By promoting a “common front” with trade union bureaucrats and Labour, Liberal and Conservative apparatchiks against the National Front—a pathetic motley outfit depicted in the exhibition photographs by Colin Jones—the SWP diverted workers from the necessary conflict with the Callaghan Labour government. Its imposition of International Monetary Fund-dictated austerity measures, which culminated in the 1979 “Winter of Discontent”, paved the way for the triumph of the real right-wing threat of that time posed by Thatcher and the state apparatus.

“The Cost of Living”, the second room in the exhibition “spotlights UK class dynamics in the 1980s” in which “the foundations of working class identity were being eroded”. Life for millions of workers are depicted in the images of the homeless by Don McCullin, Paul Graham’s impersonal, dirty unemployment office waiting rooms, Tish Murtha’s “Youth Unemployment” series and Marketa Luskacova’s “Street Musicians”. Chris Killip’s stark photos of the devastated industrial north can be found further on in the exhibition.

These images are contrasted with those of the middle-class and skilled workers that Thatcher sought to buy off with the fruits of the speculative binge, described as “popular capitalism”, and ridiculed in Anna Fox’s “yuppies” series and Martin Parr’s “Hooray Henries”.

It is in the remaining eight rooms of the exhibition that the celebration of identity politics really takes hold.

Many of the artists in the exhibition speak openly about the move away from portraying the external world to questions of identity and self—including the use of their own bodies.

In a short video, Martin Parr describes how in the early 1980s with the introduction of colour photography, “I began to look and examine the whole notion of documentary photography in the United Kingdom and it struck me when I looked around that you tended to have the very wealthy portrayed and the very poor portrayed and this sort of territory in the middle which is basically you, me and your viewers who tended to get sidelined and

overlooked.

“Now I am so middle class, it’s typical and of course Britain itself is a very middle-class country... we’ve become in the last 10-15 years a much wealthier country. So really that’s ultimately my agenda now is to photograph the wealth of the West in the way that a photographer would traditionally expect to be going to a famine or a war or to document something quite remote or in the third world.”

Artist and creative director Franklyn Rodgers declares, “80s Britain was a time of socio-political and economic discord, but it was also an adventure; a new frontier with ideas of redefinition. You had to make your mark with what you knew in a world that seemed indifferent. The discovery of the self, ubiquitous with teenage years, just behind me, a rite of passage took place, shaped in a distinctly contrasted post-colonial climate, which reflected a time of uncertainty in the British consciousness of identity.

“Looking back, I drew strength from the internal, more so to make a sense of self... The Britain I knew was redefining itself, a melting pot where different subcultures stood side by side visually and musically distinct. It was an exciting time of change, but great things do not come out of comfortable spaces.”

After four decades of Thatcherite anti-working class policies carried out by successive Tory and Labour governments, the self satisfaction exuded by Parr and Rodgers epitomises the response of a privileged layer of the middle class.

But this stands in stark contrast to the millions of workers, especially young people, who have been the victims of the historically unprecedented transfer of wealth into the hands of the financial oligarchy and who are now waging a struggle against genocide and ethnic cleansing in Gaza and the growth of the far right, in defence of democratic rights, and seeking an end to grinding exploitation and poverty. For them, the struggles of the 1980s and a reckoning with the architects of betrayal will be an important element in their revolutionary political education.



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