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# ‘Pam ponders Paul Morley’s cat’: *City Fun* and the politics of post-punk

David Wilkinson

Manchester’s *City Fun* (1978–83) bears all the hallmarks of punk fanzine media. Early issues in particular feature impulsive anti-authoritarian rants alongside reviews and ruminations on the meaning of punk. *City Fun*’s often striking covers varied in style, though Dada-indebted collages by Linder Sterling and Jon Savage captured a distinctively post-punk structure of feeling; one riven by the crisis of the political conjuncture, which nevertheless offered glimpses of utopia through the joins. It is worth asking how the zine captured the conflicted and evolving politics of the British counterculture as it mutated, fragmented and fed into punk, post-punk and beyond against a backdrop of collapsing post-war welfare-capitalism and the rise of Thatcherite neoliberalism.

Why examine such a development? As I have argued elsewhere, post-punk offers extensive insight into ideological battles fought out in the late 1970s and 1980s over what it might mean to live a liberated and fulfilled life; battles with urgent contemporary relevance. The association of certain strands of post-punk with the post-war libertarian left meant that it often carried through the utopianism of 1960s radicalism into the early days of Thatcherism. This utopianism took muted but nevertheless vital forms during a moment usually characterised by left historiography as bleak, hopeless and even apocalyptic. Post-punk, then, may act as a resource of hope in specifically neoliberal, crisis-ridden conditions. Yet post-punk also marked the incorporation of the

counterculture in various ways – not least the aspirational postmodern turn of the ‘new pop’ – thus teaching harder lessons about the limitations, as well as the possibilities, of countercultural revolt.<sup>1</sup>

Studying *City Fun* reveals that a number of the preoccupations and tensions of post-punk made themselves felt not just in the music but also in its grassroots media. The zine’s sustained run, its collective editorial team and its practical function as a nerve centre for the Manchester scene, with eventual national distribution and a relatively high circulation for a publication of its kind, make it an especially significant example of post-punk media through which to examine these issues.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter considers four distinct but interrelated themes. Firstly, debates over the viability of independent, oppositional media production, which in many respects mirrored those taking place in the music weeklies over independent labels. Secondly, debates over the aesthetics and politics of post-punk, which are focused here through two examples: *City Fun*’s sometimes fractious relationship with Factory Records, the dominant centre of Manchester’s post-punk scene; and the zine’s equally fractious attitudes to the London-centric drift of post-punk following the initial regionalist promise of the latter. Both examples disinterred tensions of class and education that were familiar enough given the varied backgrounds of those who participated in post-punk, yet which took quite specific forms here.<sup>3</sup>

In less obvious ways, such tensions animate the third theme, which is the idiosyncratic attitude of *City Fun* toward the sexual and gender politics so captivatingly brought to the fore by post-punk. This attitude was determined in no small part by the central involvement of Liz Naylor and Cath Carroll; a pair who had grown up on the working-class fringes of the Greater Manchester conurbation and who were still teenagers when they began their brilliantly camp, warped and incisive contributions to the zine.

Finally, class also mediated the fourth theme of this chapter: *City Fun*’s take on politics with a big ‘p’, especially the nascent fragmentation of the left into identity-based struggles. These overlapped with post-punk via its countercultural and libertarian left inheritance. More or less self-consciously, the zine associated such politics with a particular fraction of the middle class and ruthlessly satirised them on this basis. Yet, as we will see, it did so without thereby becoming either reactionary or unequivocally pessimistic.

### ***‘Keeping control’: cultural production***

As with many strands of punk and post-punk, the origins of *City Fun* can be traced to the counterculture and the post-war libertarian left. Bob Dickinson,

who wrote for the zine between 1980 and 1982, refers to its co-founder Andy Zero as a 'short haired punk hippie'. Dickinson notes of a photo of Zero's friend and fellow co-founder Martin X: 'As you can see, he's not that young ... I asked him once what his favourite gig was and he said [German beat/psychedelic band] The Rattles at the Twisted Wheel in 1968'.<sup>4</sup>

This lineage was as true of the zine's infrastructure as its founders. For most of its existence *City Fun* used Rochdale Alternative Press as its printer. RAP was a co-operative that began life as the Moss Side Press in 1970, which in turn grew out of a local housing activist group. As well as hippie underground papers *Grass Eye* and *Mole Express*, Moss Side Press/RAP printed a large network of community publications including *Tameside Eye*, *Bury Metro* and *Salford Champion*.<sup>5</sup> The focus of such titles on the neglected concerns of working-class locales alongside critiques of local authorities and businesses reflected libertarian left preoccupations with anti-statism, mutual aid and direct democracy characteristic of the period. One of the last issues of *Mole Express* even featured a symbolic, baton-passing feature on punk.<sup>6</sup> Liz Naylor has called *Mole Express* 'the greatest magazine ever'.<sup>7</sup> The relish with which it engaged in scurrilous dirt-digging was steadfastly maintained by *City Fun* in the continuation of 'gossip' and 'nasty rumours' columns from the earlier paper.

Out of this foment emerged a deeply idealistic endeavour. The first volume of *City Fun* (1978–80) attempted to make good on the democratising, DIY promise of punk. Hierarchy was frowned upon. 'We don't edit', Andy Zero noted in an interview with the *New Manchester Review*, the city's equivalent of *Time Out*. 'We don't cut out anything'.<sup>8</sup> By this Zero meant not simply specific content but also the vast majority of contributions they were sent, as he noted in a pedantic response to accusations of cronyism: 'There are less than six contributions that we have never used.'<sup>9</sup> Few articles featured bylines and those that did were often written under pseudonyms, aiming to discourage egotism and to highlight the zine's collectivist ethos. Just as punk and post-punk bands demystified the recording process by listing costs and 'how to' guides on record sleeves, so *City Fun* featured articles like 'How To Produce A Fanzine' and made some attempt to publicly account for its finances.<sup>10</sup>

This devotion to grass-roots inclusivity did not come without its problems. Early in *City Fun*'s existence, the zine published a number of critical letters noting its uneven quality, including one that began 'Dear Shitty Fun'.<sup>11</sup> While the tone of these letters was petty, their criticisms were often accurate. Print was sometimes blotted or trailed off the edges of pages, which themselves might be duplicated accidentally or stapled in the wrong order. Though much of the content anticipated the sharp wit and diverse concerns that were later to define the zine, it sat alongside mediocre reviews – 'Siouxsie was great I

think she's lovely'<sup>12</sup> – and doubtful stabs at creative expression. These included the erratic scansion and bludgeoning rhyme of a poem detailing one man's transformation into a sex doll after a blood donation goes wrong.<sup>13</sup>

Such criticisms anticipated one of the central schisms of post-punk, which could be traced in the pages of the national music weeklies from around the beginning of 1980. As Simon Reynolds notes, key writers and post-punk acts such as Scritti Politti, eager for impact, 'abruptly lost patience' with the 'charming eccentricity' and 'honourable amateurism' of post-punk's more experimental trajectories, uniting around a sensibility of 'mobility' and 'ambition' that has become known as the 'new pop'.<sup>14</sup> Although initially loyal to the independent sector, many of those drawn to new pop began to advocate what Paul Morley called 'an overground brightness' that often entailed strategically signing to a major label. Bob Last, manager of Gang of Four and the Human League (who signed to EMI and Virgin respectively), has opined that the capital reserves of the majors actually made them more 'independent' than post-punk indies like Rough Trade and Last's own label, Fast Product, increasing the likelihood of them being 'a space where different things could happen'.<sup>15</sup>

At stake was an implicit ideological link between economics and aesthetics, which implied that independent productive activity motivated by broadly leftist and democratic values<sup>16</sup> was destined not only to be economically unviable but also to limit the quality and developmental possibilities of cultural production. The same tendency could be noted in the way that Green Gartside, frontman of Scritti Politti, began to scorn the self-released output of his contemporaries as 'failed attempts at music'. By the mid-1980s this division had hardened, as Reynolds observes: 'Most chart pop was glossy ... hi-tech, ultra-modern. Indie made a fetish of the opposite characteristics: scruffy guitars ... lo-fi or Luddite production, and a retro (usually sixties) slant', settling for a 'resentfully impotent opposition' to the mainstream.<sup>17</sup>

The most significant determining pressure on new pop rhetoric was the growing ideological influence of Thatcherite neoliberalism. This was an indirect process; many advocates of new pop retained their leftist commitments. But it is difficult not to observe parallels between their view of the independent sector 'in terms of stagnation'<sup>18</sup> and Thatcher's soundbite summations of the arguments of free market economists such as Friedrich von Hayek: 'socialism is a system [that is] inherently inefficient'.<sup>19</sup> The message was clear – socialism, including co-operative endeavours like Rough Trade – was limiting, undynamic and therefore unfree.

In terms of the specific qualities of cultural production, and thus the kind of pleasure to be derived from it, Paul Morley's advocacy of new pop's 'transient thrill'<sup>20</sup> carried overtones of neoliberalism's colonisation of consumerism as

central to human fulfilment ('There are great industries in other people's pleasures', Margaret Thatcher once claimed, ominously).<sup>21</sup> Along with this new pop sensibility went a discourse of 'quality control'<sup>22</sup> and a self-awareness of pop as product inflected with very *du jour* games of postmodern blank parody – visible, for instance, in the way that Scritti Politti singles began to deliberately resemble the packaging of Courvoisier brandy and Dunhill cigarettes.

There were comparable internal critiques of the world of radical publishing to which *City Fun* belonged. These would soon acquire somewhat greater intellectual gravitas than a few snotty letters sent into a zine. The authors of *What a Way To Run a Railroad* included Charles Landry, founder of the think-tank Comedia, and David Morley, a former member of the leftist Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. The book mounted a stinging takedown of the libertarian left's oppositional enterprises, especially its grass-roots media, arguing that their failure to make headway was a direct consequence of their politically 'prefigurative' forms.<sup>23</sup> Though the authors favoured a mixed economy, their enthusiasm for conventional market mechanisms hinted at the future accommodation the left would make with neoliberalism in the form of New Labour. As with Reynolds's observation of indie's fetishism of 'impotent opposition', so the book's authors accused the left of the belief that 'it doesn't matter if we win, as long as we've played the game in the right spirit.'<sup>24</sup>

A hint of this sensibility is present in Andy Zero's response to *City Fun*'s naysayers – 'sorry, but we are amateurs'<sup>25</sup> – and in the cheerful admission of loose accounting in financial reports: 'what happened to the rest, we don't know.'<sup>26</sup> Overall, though, the zine avoided making a virtue of amateurishness. It rejected the word 'fanzine' as a self-description for itself on this basis and instead aimed for the status of a 'proper magazine'.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, after around 18 months of existence, it underwent a relaunch in part prompted by an embittered feud with Factory Records, which is discussed in the following section. An exasperated editorial in the final edition of volume 1 acknowledged that *City Fun* had become 'sub-standard'. Its diagnosis, however, was not a lack of conventional professionalism. In fact, attempts at conventionality were seen as part of the problem. It was felt that a fixation on fortnightly production had created a 'treadmill' effect, leading to 'boring' music coverage and content for the sake of content.<sup>28</sup>

The zine's 'caretakers' aimed to learn from this, retaining the commitment to regular publication while looking to print 'more varied, interesting and intelligent' material.<sup>29</sup> *City Fun*'s renewed vision, though, was a far cry from the new pop's quasi-ironic inhabitation of consumer culture and the turn-to-style

in magazines like *The Face*, whose launch was concurrent with *City Fun*'s soul-searching. Avoiding predictable market niches such as 'fanzine/music paper', the zine's central collective kicked off volume 2 (1980–82) with a desire to re-establish a broad focus on Manchester's 'sub-world' and to do so through involving particularly gifted writers much more directly – especially Naylor, Carroll and Dickinson.<sup>30</sup> Rather than a turn to marketing, then, the solution to 'having fun in cities'<sup>31</sup> lay in increased co-operation and commitment to a subcultural constituency. As for quality, Zero directly inverted the equation of the new pop: 'if you do sell out you end up with inferior stuff.'<sup>32</sup>

Admittedly, the free-for-all policy of contribution was abandoned, though not without internal conflict. Zero observed regretfully that 'just because somebody hasn't got a good education or isn't particularly literate we don't want to discriminate against them ... but we've also got to reject rubbish'.<sup>33</sup> Yet the collective continued to hold open contributor meetings – 'we'd give them tea and biscuits and we'd try and develop ideas and enthusiasms', remembers Dickinson<sup>34</sup> – while commitments to financial transparency and the frequent avoidance of bylines were retained.

*City Fun* was rejuvenated by this reshuffle, with a quantum leap in the variety and quality of its output. Layout improved, and articles now encompassed multiple topics – the Iranian revolution, English eccentricity and gleefully perverse satires of heteronormative children's fiction, to name but a few. Visually, the zine was enhanced by the surreal and frequently hilarious cover art of Brian Mills and the kitsch collage of Naylor and Carroll, which juxtaposed archaic advertising imagery with 'cartoons from old 1960s annuals and comics'.<sup>35</sup> Detailed local listings of gigs, alternative cinema and the like provided a further impetus to purchase, implying activity rather than stagnation.

Ultimately, *City Fun*'s demise three years later was not due to any automatic incompatibility between its oppositional, anti-commercial attitudes and a capacity for enjoyable, professionally assembled output. As Dickinson notes, the zine's cessation was coterminous with the decline of Greater Manchester's alternative media infrastructure more generally. Burnout resulted from 'a time when the sense of community disappeared ... with Thatcherism', as Sue Ashby of *Bury Metro* recalls.<sup>36</sup> Such breakdown coincided with the second term of the Thatcher government. This period saw the concerted targeting of the institutional 'nooks and crannies' which the libertarian left had managed to occupy, including left-wing local authorities such as Manchester's with sympathies toward oppositional cultural production.<sup>37</sup>

It is on this score that the true limitations of such cultural production become apparent. In inevitably hostile conditions, small-scale 'prefigurative' initiatives can only go so far. Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams argue much the

same of contemporary ‘folk politics’ on the left – ‘the guiding intuition that immediacy is always better and often more authentic’ – whose roots they trace to the libertarian and identitarian turn of the 1960s onwards, advocating instead a more coordinated project of ‘scale and expansion’.<sup>38</sup>

Nevertheless, what *City Fun*’s six years of existence demonstrated was the possibility that an entertaining, oppositional subcultural media could be sustained – for a time, at least – by collectivist values and practices. The zine’s run was by no means harmonious. Internal conflicts saw the gradual loss of its original founders, leaving the third and final volume dominated by Naylor and Carroll. Yet such tension could be productive, as Dickinson observes: ‘I think it lasted because of all the arguing! It made people – it toughened everybody’s ideas up about what they were writing and why they were writing it. It made you think – you’ve got to go through with this, you’ve got to go out and sell it because there’s other people doing it as well.’<sup>39</sup>

### ***‘Fat Tories’: the aesthetics and politics of post-punk***

As might be expected, something of *City Fun*’s attitude to cultural production could be seen in the positions it took on the aesthetics and politics of post-punk itself. Such positions acquire heightened significance when thrown into relief with those of the more dominant Factory Records milieu, which has since absorbed the bulk of popular historical attention to Manchester’s post-punk past.

Relations between the two camps were by no means entirely hostile. Factory boss Tony Wilson had funded Naylor and Carroll’s first foray into independent publishing, the one-off colour zine *925*.<sup>40</sup> Factory also arranged a benefit gig for *City Fun* early in 1980, although it was the zine’s review of this performance that was to be the trigger for open warfare; a war played out in the pages of *City Fun* for some time afterwards.

Objecting to the reviewer’s claim that Joy Division’s support acts, Section 25 and A Certain Ratio, sounded like ‘inferior versions of the main band’ due to Factory’s ‘tightly conceptual approach’,<sup>41</sup> Wilson penned a contemptuous response. Accusing the ‘City Fun Bored’ [*sic*] of ‘third rate journalism’, a ‘turgid level of aesthetic debate’ and ‘following trends culled from back copies of *NME*’, the letter pinpointed *City Fun*’s supposed failing as an ‘inability to feel unique qualities in the work of bands still at an early stage of development’. It culminated in the announcement that Factory would henceforth remove the zine from its mailing list.<sup>42</sup>

Aside from a heavy dose of insecurity, what Wilson’s letter revealed was the risk of condescension deriving from his Cambridge education. This was an education that also informed the ‘tightly conceptual’ nature of Factory and



which allowed Wilson to pontificate on the ‘minutiae’ of live rock ‘choreography’.<sup>43</sup> Affronted, but nonetheless attempting to ameliorate relations (‘FOR FUCKS SAKE we should have more in common than we do in difference’), Andy Zero accepted that there was room for *City Fun* to improve while playing up Wilson’s inconsistency. How could the zine be expected to anticipate post-punk’s aesthetic evolution if it was to be shut out of the channels of communication? Zero also opined that ‘it is far better to acknowledge an influence than deny it’, highlighting the Warholian origins of Factory’s name.<sup>44</sup> With both gestures, Zero went some way to puncturing the residual modernist arrogance that accompanied Factory’s reworking of twentieth-century avant-garde aesthetics.

Martin X elaborated on the educational and classed dimensions of the spat, teasing Wilson over the co-existence of his Granada TV day job with Factory’s artistic ambitions. ‘It must be so intellectually FRUSTRATING to have to share a television channel with Coronation Street, Crossroads, Mr and Mrs etc.’ Defending the ‘embarrassing hoy-poloy [*sic*] who hang around Virgin Records and the Underground Market’, X upheld their right to voice their opinions freely in print, whether or not they had a ‘good job’ or had been ‘educated to the eyeballs’.<sup>45</sup>

Some insight into *City Fun*’s attitude towards the purpose of post-punk is afforded by X’s admission that his grammar school past allowed him to understand Wilson’s ‘high-blown phraseology’. Similarly telling is the threat that every Factory ‘missive’ would be printed for the eyes of ‘the great uneducated masses that some of us are so busily trying to guide towards the light’.<sup>46</sup> Rather than a competitive race to throw off the formal shackles of rock’s past, post-punk was seen as an oppositional, collective and potentially liberating means of fulfilment. This sensibility could be detected, for instance, in stream-of-consciousness opposition to ‘trendy minimalism’ and the desire for ‘honest’ bands, ‘uniting living human beings bringing we jolly consumer types into that real light [*sic*].’<sup>47</sup>

In viewing cultural production as key to political struggle and in stressing the responsibility of an educated class fraction to promote the democratisation of culture, X’s attitude resembled nothing so much as what Alan Sinfield has called ‘left culturism’.<sup>48</sup> This was a prevalent structure of feeling among progressive intellectuals in the post-war period; although its usual focus on appreciation of traditional high arts was replaced here by a stress on grass-roots pop cultural production.

A pessimistic take on this flashpoint might see it as internecine subcultural bickering determined by inequalities of education and class, which could result in vastly exaggerated differences of political position. ‘Factory we all just used

to call “Fat Tory” records and they were like the mill owners’, Naylor recalls.<sup>49</sup> More optimistically, it may well have been Wilson’s barbed comments on the quality of *City Fun*’s output that provided the impetus for the zine to rethink its editorial policy a few issues later. Factory, meanwhile, was held to account for the more troubling features of its iconoclasm. Within the confines of Manchester’s post-punk scene at least, its tendencies toward monopoly were momentarily challenged as *City Fun* printed letters confirming a wider perception of the label’s ‘elitist attitudes’ and anger about ‘the way they dismiss everything else.’<sup>50</sup>

*City Fun*’s take on the post-punk moment was not only visible at a local level. Further from home, its left culturism also prevailed in the stance it took on the London-based weekly music press – especially the *NME*. This was nowhere more evident than in the cartoons of Ray Lowry. In a series of comic strips, Lowry depicted thinly veiled caricatures of new pop ideologue and Greater Manchester export Paul Morley, satirising the postmodern turn that Morley’s writing had taken. ‘Behind closed blinds’, grinning journalists spouted pretentious, pseudo-revolutionary verbiage at one another.<sup>51</sup> The thrust of Lowry’s critique was not anti-intellectual populism, however – unlike *Sounds*’ Garry Bushell’s dubious attempts to rally support to his lumpen ‘Oi’ punk faction.<sup>52</sup> Rather, Lowry highlighted the potential complicity of ‘windy hyperbole’ with the dominant culture it appeared to oppose.

Sharply observed strips drew attention to the links between a new pop rhetoric of formal innovation and the pop market’s need for new product. Such critique located itself squarely within the broader conjuncture of early Thatcherism by captioning music journalists as ‘post-monetarists’.<sup>53</sup> Lowry also caustically observed the way that this call for musical radicalism could become a substitute for political radicalism – one that offered pleasurable compensation for the failure to put ‘your principles where your mouth is’. Perched eagerly on a chair, a young journalist declares to a musician: ‘I’d like to talk about your new album “Flogging the Departed Quadruped” ... its wittily imperceptible shifts and falls make me gasp and groan in delight’.<sup>54</sup> Here Lowry’s scorn threatened to confirm what Simon Reynolds has characterised as post-punk’s ‘hair shirt’ tendencies,<sup>55</sup> reinforcing new pop’s reaction against ‘bad-drab’ dead ends.<sup>56</sup> Yet the very form of Lowry’s work offered its own kind of critical pleasure.

Sharing a similar pedigree to Andy Zero and Martin X, Lowry was working class, born locally and grammar school educated.<sup>57</sup> Despite his London punk connections (Lowry designed the iconic cover of the Clash’s *London Calling* and had himself contributed to the *NME*), he remained resident in Lancashire. His jibes at fellow grammar school boy-done-good Morley seem motivated

by a belief in the differing paths available to the socially mobile within the world of rock.

On the one hand, you could be geographically mobile too, migrating to the centre of cultural, political and economic power to join the ranks of what one *City Fun* writer dubbed the ‘pseudy berks’: those whose apparent aim was to become as individually ‘successful as the people they slag off’, despite their professed political intentions.<sup>58</sup> One Lowry strip featured a journalist declaring: ‘we all have our parts to play in the revolutionary struggle ... it’s just that I want mine to be on a stage receiving the adulation of thousands and wearing a terrific little New Romantic number.’<sup>59</sup> The alternative, it appeared, was to deploy intelligence and wit to cut through ‘whatever the current fashion happens to be’,<sup>60</sup> espousing a disenchanted but dogged belief that ‘things can be changed’.<sup>61</sup>

No doubt the choice was not so clear-cut in reality. As in the case of Factory, though, what *City Fun* offered here was an alternative perspective to a dominant subcultural discourse, thereby fulfilling its democratic aims.

### ***‘The joys of oppression’: gender and sexuality***

It was not only post-punk’s overall aesthetic and political direction that *City Fun* writers mapped in geographical and classed terms. This was also true of the way that Naylor and Carroll, especially, approached post-punk negotiations of gender and sexuality. In *The Lost Women of Rock Music*, Helen Reddington deduces from her interview with Naylor that the latter ‘felt ... feminists were a middle class confection’.<sup>62</sup> Naylor, who was expelled from school at fifteen, recalls: ‘There was a real tension between myself and feminism at the time. In Manchester, Whalley Range and Chorlton and Didsbury, where all the feminists lived, that was everything punk *wasn’t*.’<sup>63</sup> This did not mean, though, that *City Fun* avoided engagement with punk and post-punk’s interventions on gender and sexuality. Instead it became a focal point for the ‘sexual-political dialogue’ initiated by Manchester punk pioneers such as the Buzzcocks and Linder Sterling.<sup>64</sup>

The first volume, directed largely by Andy Zero and Martin X, seemed loosely aligned with the mission of post-punk fronts like Rock Against Sexism to challenge unreconstructed attitudes at the level of form as much as content.<sup>65</sup> One local band’s performance was dismissed as ‘shit, slow macho rock.’<sup>66</sup> Nevertheless, awkward disjunctions arose from the zine’s early policy of publishing all contributions. Some live reviews, for instance, evinced a salacious concentration on the attractiveness or otherwise of female musicians rather than on what they were actually doing.

Sexism and homophobia did not go unchallenged by the collective. One response under a review of Motörhead and all-female metal band Girlschool read ‘thanks for writing – it patronises women and is down on poofters, but otherwise, ta. The poofters at *City Fun*.<sup>67</sup> Despite the humour, there was a tinge of sanctimony here that could also be seen elsewhere. Some writers tied themselves in knots, accompanying even passing expressions of desire for women performers with an apologetic tone that was characteristic of the censorious variety of feminism on the ascendant at this time.<sup>68</sup>

A showcase of Manchester’s still more or less clandestine gay scene in the second issue of *City Fun* gave an indication of how the zine’s approach would change as new voices came to the fore. Signed ‘P.N.’, the piece was in all likelihood written by Pip Nicholls, the ‘androgynous’ bass player of The Distractions who lived with Naylor and Carroll.<sup>69</sup> Describing the Picador venue as ‘one of those contraception clubs, it could be as reliable as the Pill if used correctly’, Nicholls’ article displayed hints of the arch humour that would prevail from volume 2 onwards.<sup>70</sup>

This humour was often articulated through a camp inhabitation of existing discourses, generating a less declarative, more subtle and ironic kind of critique, which often relied on visual pleasure for its effect. One issue featured a sex shop advert for a range of dildos, with the head of each one replaced by cut-outs of the faces of A Certain Ratio – or ‘A Certain Fellatio’, as they were captioned. Significantly, this wind-up was positioned below a kitsch image of a beaming young heterosexual couple gazing into one another’s eyes as they picnicked on the beach, which looked like it had been culled from a 1960s magazine. In a classic piece of punk bricolage, the two images fed off one another, making an implicit mockery of commodified heteronormative romance and overly serious male musicians.

The shift in focus was not total, reflecting divergent attitudes within the collective on how to frame issues of gender and sexuality. Throughout volume 2, skits co-existed with serious reflections and exposés. One article aired ‘ugly rumours’ that Manchester clubs Rotters and Pips operated a ‘sexuality ban’, noting that the latter’s membership rules forbade men from dancing with male partners.<sup>71</sup> Also present, however, was a persistent suspicion of overt political engagement. This is difficult to trace due to the anonymity of many articles. It may sometimes have been the work of Naylor and Carroll though, given Carroll’s long-running ‘Pam Ponders’ satirical diary column of a middle-class feminist and Naylor’s take on the stance of the zine at the time: ‘Politics are a bit clichéd ... nobody takes notice of rantings.’<sup>72</sup>

It is possible that the same mode that lightened the tone of *City Fun*’s interventions on gender and sexuality may at times have undermined them,

given the ‘disengaged, depoliticised’ tendencies of camp.<sup>73</sup> In Britain, the queer sensibility that includes camp carries residual traces of its 1920s adoption by leisure class aesthetes in reaction against ‘Victorian seriousness and responsibility’.<sup>74</sup> Though ‘twentieth century working class culture defined itself against the middle class queer’,<sup>75</sup> this may well account for the transgressive appeal of the latter sensibility to those working-class punks like Naylor who: ‘Had a really strong sense of not being in the straight world ... my mum would say things like “why don’t you go to secretarial college – shorthand is always useful.” And I thought, “I want to be Janis Joplin, I don’t want to go to fucking secretarial college.”’<sup>76</sup> An unattributed article entitled ‘Never Mind Dear, We’re All Made The Same ... Though Some More Than Others’ railed against ‘the hordes ... people frightened by culture/intelligence/sophistication’<sup>77</sup> in a gesture that resonated with the historical elision of queerness and upwardly mobile aestheticism.<sup>78</sup>

That said, this mode was not guaranteed to preclude political commitment, nor did it always imply a sense of outsider superiority generated by exclusion. The author of ‘The Joys of Oppression – By Mouth or by Rectum’ critiqued those gays and feminists whom they saw as excessively attached to subcultural insularity, viewing this as the elitist desire to be ‘something other than your average grotty, unspectacular prole’. Observing the development of ever-narrowing identity-based cliques and the consequent competitive tensions between them, the writer exasperatedly opined: ‘wouldn’t you think that with ... the need for education/liberation that gays could stop fighting amongst themselves for a moment. It’s just like a Labour Party into disco and wearing uniforms.’<sup>79</sup>

### *‘Meanwhile, back in the jungle’: the political conjuncture*

As ‘The Joys of Oppression’ suggested, *City Fun*’s witty hostility towards identitarian fragmentation was not confined to gender and sexuality. For one writer, ‘tribalism’ had become ‘endemic’ to British society – from ‘the South West Middlesbrough Lesbian Whole-food Commune and Nose-Flute Ensemble Rock Against Sloth Hunting in Guatemala 1984 Committee’ to the ‘Shetland Liberation Front’. Included in this perspective was ‘the current proliferation of quaint youth cults ... and their myriad mutations and sub-factions’ that had followed in the wake of punk.<sup>80</sup>

While the writer acknowledged the pleasures of subcultural style, they despaired of the way that tribal hostilities could so easily be manipulated ‘by those whose games are played on a grander scale’, drawing historical parallels with the incorporation of Scottish clans into the service of British imperialism.<sup>81</sup>

The perspective has much in common with Fredric Jameson's diagnosis of the rise of the 'group' in late capitalism – and of postmodern identity politics as being in part a 'properly interminable series of neighbourhood issues ... invested with something of Nietzsche's social Darwinism', at risk of 'disintegrating into the more obscene consumerist pluralisms' of the dominant culture.<sup>82</sup>

On this front, *City Fun* also honed in on the broad left culture of which it was a part. At a time when sections of the British left were retreating from a previously held faith in the centrality of working-class politics, the zine elaborated a nuanced and comical critique of this tendency. Its prophetic qualities were perhaps unique among the post-punk milieu.

From one angle, Cath Carroll's 'Pam Ponders' satire – which ran over the course of seven issues in volume 2 – might be viewed precisely as a form of myopic subcultural 'tribalism'. Dickinson remembers Carroll and Naylor's 'cynical' attitude toward Manchester's post-punk feminist scene, which provided Carroll with material for the feature: 'They thought it was all middle class really.'<sup>83</sup> From another angle, the satire's scope is much broader, chiming with Andrew Milner's argument that the middle-class intelligentsia has overwhelmingly and unrepresentatively led the new social movements of the post-war and postmodern period, thus determining the 'developing preference' of such movements 'for individualist ... as opposed to structural solutions.'<sup>84</sup>

It was exactly this self-conscious individualism that 'Pam Ponders' targeted, mercilessly observing the way that the apparently liberating personal politics of 1960s radicalism were at risk of tipping over into an incoherent blend of moralism and narcissism: 'Pam Bennett, mid-forties and VOCAL when it comes to WHAT MATTERS, has hewn a tiny window into her life for the world to peek thru'. She invites City Funsters to share in her triumphs, frustrations and, above all, her growth as a PERSON.<sup>85</sup>

From her son's 'nocturnal emissions' to the indiscretions of her social circle, Pam is given to spuriously politicising the minutiae of her daily life, evoking the 'postmodern propensity to represent power as ubiquitous'.<sup>86</sup> Even the family pets – Sitwell the cat, Prentiss the slug and Chloe the communal cannabis plant – are embroiled in the never-ending sequence of psychodramas. Those who fall short of Pam's standards are judged harshly in ways that fuse the moral and the self-regarding. Befriending 'a pair of really great wimmin' on the train, Jan and Trixi, Pam is 'appalled' to learn that Jan's mother cannot tolerate the couple bringing up a child together. 'God, just hope I never get so uptight with Raitch', Pam reflects of her own daughter.<sup>87</sup>

With regard to tribalism, 'Pam Ponders' presciently delineates the class fraction from which such attitudes emanated, noting too the emergent political formation around which the right of this spectrum would coalesce. Dashing

about on her moped to media and housing conferences, organising benefit ‘bops’ played by the ‘Wandering Menstruals’, Pam is the epitome of the ‘new middle class’ that Raphael Samuel identified as dominating the membership of the newly formed Social Democratic Party: ‘It seems to have a specific appeal to those ... who are familiar with the language and procedures of administration, and who like to see things hum.’<sup>88</sup> Sure enough, Pam records in passing: ‘Joined SDP. Bloody expensive.’<sup>89</sup>

As the major beneficiaries of post-war consumerism, this class fraction developed what Samuel called a ‘new emotional economy’: one of ‘instant rather than deferred gratification’, in which ‘sensual pleasures ... are the very field on which social claims are established and sexual identities confirmed.’<sup>90</sup> Here there is a hint of the ambiguity of countercultural and libertarian left politicisations of pleasure between the 1960s and the 1980s. As much as such politicisation arose from disaffection with consumerist distortions of social and sexual life, prompting hopes for un-alienated forms of fulfilment, it was also determined by the way that same consumerism melted down collectivism in favour of a particular kind of individual gratification.

André Gorz notes that ‘individuals socialised by consumerism ... are encouraged to “be themselves” by distinguishing themselves from others’.<sup>91</sup> Something of this ambiguity can be seen in Pam’s name-dropping of vegan eateries, her penchant for obscure Norwegian film festivals and her attempted pursuit of exotic extramarital encounters. These are as much self-indulgent distinction as they are opportunities to advocate different ways of life, while fulminating against ‘PENILE FASCISM’ and the like.<sup>92</sup>

*City Fun*’s lampooning of ‘middle class radicalism gone sour’<sup>93</sup> pulls no punches. Pam meets her end Isadora Duncan-style, her husband Cliff recounting how ‘that long scarf I knitted for her ... got caught in the back wheel’ of the moped.<sup>94</sup> Yet it never hardens into opposition to the left *per se* – even the libertarian left’s concentration on the cultural and personal. Instalments of ‘Pam Ponders’ could co-exist on the same page as articles with titles like ‘A Breakdown of Oppression’. This Althusserian tract spelled out the penetration of hegemony to a ‘pre-conscious level’ and viewed the media, education and family as ‘arm[s] of that same octopus that controls the police and the market.’<sup>95</sup> It may well be the case that *City Fun*’s roots in the infrastructure of the libertarian left accounts for this turn of events.

### **Conclusion**

The long run of *City Fun*, combined with the sheer scope of its evolving content and its shifting collective of contributors, make it difficult to know

where to begin when reflecting upon its long-term significance. If we consider cultural production and the zine's stance on post-punk, we might draw some inspiration from an alternative publication that claimed freedom as the opportunity for those usually denied a public voice to express their perspectives at a point where the right was moving to equate freedom with the capitalist market.<sup>96</sup> Though the internet has democratised communication to some extent, it is worth recalling Raymond Williams's observation that straightforwardly capitalist forms of media risk limiting freedom to 'what can profitably be said'.<sup>97</sup>

One of Manchester's most influential contemporary local media outlets is I Love Manchester, a website that proclaims itself 'a way to express our love of the city', recycling countercultural platitudes like 'make love not war' and 'join the movement' in its 'about' section. Along with its coverage of the city's thriving independent cultural scene and the opportunities the site affords for young writers, such manoeuvres appear to position I Love Manchester in the broad lineage of publications like *City Fun*. Yet despite repeatedly pronouncing itself 'incorruptible', the site also claims proudly to have been founded by a group of 'content marketing experts'. The description highlights a contradiction between an apparently democratic desire to 'harness the energy of people' and the site's manipulatively commercial remit, with its clickbait headlines and content that blurs journalism with advertising copy.<sup>98</sup> You are unlikely to find reviews of bands with captions like 'Don't look at my hairstyle – it might fall over', as was the case with *City Fun*'s irreverent commitment to uncensored opinion.<sup>99</sup>

This is not to suggest hypocrisy on the part of I Love Manchester: clearly its *raison d'être* is different to that of *City Fun* and is plainly acknowledged. But in terms of independent media, it does indicate the gap between *City Fun*'s oppositional rhetoric, which was bound up with a subcultural constituency and a broader leftist project – and I Love Manchester's use of oppositional rhetoric as just one more technique of selling us stuff. The phrase 'content marketing experts' also sheds some light on the lasting relevance of *City Fun*'s concern with class, identity and the politics thereof. Evoking something of the new middle class's professional distinction, it is unsurprising that the phrase appears alongside a summary of I Love Manchester's origins. The organisation was founded to 'rise against' the riots of 2011, which erupted a year after a Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition came to power on a platform of austerity. I Love Manchester's editors reduce the riots to the 'anti-social behaviour' of their presumed inferiors, opposing such behaviour to their own 'unconditional love of the city'. Thus, Pam-like narcissism and moralism combine in an attempted colonisation of 'civic pride' and a 'cool, cultured and



cosmopolitan' demeanour, celebrating diversity – except that which uncomfortably draws attention to structural inequality and fractures the city's branding as some utopian creative hub.<sup>100</sup> Tribalism is alive and well.

One of *City Fun*'s proudest achievements was its short-circuiting of the chain of associations that has ideologically coded a desirably 'cool, cultured and cosmopolitan' future as the distinctive consumption patterns of the post-1960s left-liberal middle class, bound up with identitarian tribalism and an eagerness to take the moral high ground. This was not just expressed negatively in jibes at 'pseudoberks' and 'professional gays'.<sup>101</sup> It was also achieved positively. An alliance of renegade grammar school kids, graduates and sharp-witted, wayward drop-outs from the education system was the making of a funny, diverse and more-or-less socialist publication whose own investigative take on the riots of 1981 stands in stark contrast to the indignant reactions on show thirty years later.<sup>102</sup> In this respect, as in so many others, the zine genuinely did things differently, to paraphrase the much-abused words of its one time adversary, Tony Wilson.

## Notes

- 1 David Wilkinson, *Post-Punk, Politics and Pleasure in Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).
- 2 Bob Dickinson estimates that at its peak, around 2,000 copies of each issue were printed, with a 'high pass-on rate' and the regular purchase of back copies. Author interview with Bob Dickinson, Manchester, 14 January 2017.
- 3 Wilkinson, *Post-Punk, Politics and Pleasure*, especially pp. 52–3.
- 4 Author interview with Dickinson, 14 January 2017.
- 5 Bob Dickinson, *Imprinting the Sticks: The Alternative Press Beyond London* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997), pp. 78–82.
- 6 Mike Rowe, 'Meanwhile Back At The Ranch ...', *Mole Express*, 57, 1977.
- 7 Dickinson, *Imprinting the Sticks*, p. 150.
- 8 Bob Dickinson, 'City Fun', *New Manchester Review*, 2 November 1979, p. 15.
- 9 Andy Zero, 'News', *City Fun*, 1:7, 1978, n.p.
- 10 'How To Produce A Fanzine', *City Fun*, 1:3, 1978, n.p.; 'City Fun Finance', *City Fun*, 1:2, 1978, n.p.
- 11 *City Fun*, 1:3, 1978, n.p.
- 12 S.C. Lowe, review of Siouxsie and the Banshees at Manchester University student's union, *City Fun*, 1:2, 1978, n.p.
- 13 Bernard Who Did What, 'The Last Laugh', *City Fun*, 1:2, 1978, n.p.
- 14 Simon Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again: Postpunk 1978–1984* (London: Faber & Faber, 2005), pp. 364–6.

- 15 Neil Taylor, *Document and Eyewitness: An Intimate History of Rough Trade* (London: Orion, 2010), pp. 214–15.
- 16 Pete Dale has called this the ‘anyone can do it’ component of punk and post-punk. See Pete Dale, *Anyone Can Do It: Empowerment, Tradition and the Punk Underground* (London: Routledge, 2012).
- 17 Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, pp. 366 and 519.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 366.
- 19 Margaret Thatcher, speech to Grantham Conservatives, 4 March 1977, [www.margaretthatcher.org/document/103329](http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/103329), accessed 10 May 2017.
- 20 Paul Morley, review of Scars, *Author! Author!*, *NME*, 11 April 1981, p. 33.
- 21 Quoted in Peter Golding and Graham Murdock, ‘Privatising Pleasure’, *Marxism Today*, October 1983, pp. 32–6.
- 22 Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, p. 366.
- 23 Charles Landry, David Morley, Russell Southwood and Patrick Wright, *Whata Way To Run a Railroad: An Analysis of Radical Failure* (London: Comedia, 1985), p. 13.
- 24 *Ibid.*, pp. 92–4 and 13.
- 25 *City Fun*, 1:3, 1978, n.p.
- 26 ‘City Fun Finance’, *City Fun*, 1:2, 1978, n.p.
- 27 Andy Zero, ‘A Self Indulgence’, *City Fun*, 1:10, 1979, n.p.
- 28 ‘Charity Stops Here’, *City Fun*, 1:25, 1980, n.p.
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 ‘Welcome to a New Kind of Magazine! Exclusive Interview With City Fun Staff’, *City Fun*, 2:1, 1980, n.p.
- 31 ‘Charity Stops Here’.
- 32 ‘Welcome to a New Kind of Magazine!’
- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 Author interview with Dickinson, 14 January 2017.
- 35 *Ibid.*
- 36 Dickinson, *Imprinting the Sticks*, p. 163.
- 37 Lynne Segal, *Why Feminism? Gender, Psychology, Politics* (Cambridge: Polity, 1999), p. 21.
- 38 Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (London: Verso, 2015).
- 39 Author interview with Dickinson, 14 January 2017.
- 40 James Nice, *Shadowplayers: The Rise and Fall of Factory Records* (London: Aurum, 2010), p. 78.
- 41 AT, ‘City Fun Benefit’, *City Fun*, 1:18, 1980, n.p.
- 42 Tony Wilson, ‘Just Another Level of Turgid Aesthetic Debate’, *City Fun*, 1:21, 1980, n.p.
- 43 *Ibid.*
- 44 Andy Zero, ‘Are You Following This? A Classic Case of Overkill: The Turgid Debate ...’, *City Fun*, 1:21, 1980, n.p.
- 45 Martin X, ‘Just Another Level of Turgid Aesthetic Debate’, *City Fun*, 1:21, 1980, n.p.

- 46 *Ibid.*
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- 52 Garry Bushell and Dave McCullough, 'Cockney Rejects and the Rise of the New Punk', *Sounds*, 4 August 1979, pp. 16–17.
- 53 Lowry, untitled, *City Fun*, 2:19, 1981, n.p.
- 54 Ray Lowry, untitled, *City Fun*, 1:25, 1980, n.p.
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- 60 *Ibid.*
- 61 Lowry, untitled, *City Fun*, 2:19, 1981, n.p.
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- 63 *Ibid.*, p. 187.
- 64 Dickinson, *Imprinting the Sticks*, p. 146
- 65 For a discussion of musical form, gender and post-punk, see Caroline O'Meara, 'The Raincoats: Breaking Down Punk Rock's Masculinities', in *Popular Music*, 22:3 (2003), 299–313.
- 66 Andy Zero, untitled, *City Fun*, 1:6, 1979, n.p.
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- 68 Victor Silvester, 'Dance', *City Fun*, 1:20, 1979, n.p. For more on the sexual politics of feminism in the late 1970s and 1980s, see Lynne Segal, *Is The Future Female? Troubled Thoughts on Contemporary Feminism* (London: Virago, 1994).
- 69 Dickinson, *Imprinting the Sticks*, p. 147.
- 70 P.N., untitled, *City Fun*, 1:2, 1978, n.p.
- 71 'Sneak File', *City Fun*, 2:29, 1981, n.p.
- 72 'Welcome to a New Kind of Magazine!'
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- 74 Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century* (London: Cassell, 1994), p. 132.
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- 89 Cath Carroll [uncredited], 'Pam Ponders', *City Fun*, 2:13, 1981, n.p.
- 90 Samuel, 'The SDP and the New Middle Class', p. 259.
- 91 André Gorz, *Critique of Economic Reason* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 47.
- 92 Cath Carroll [uncredited], 'Pam Ponders', *City Fun*, 2:11, 1981, n.p.
- 93 Samuel, 'The SDP and the New Middle Class', p. 270.
- 94 Cath Carroll [uncredited], 'Pam Ponders', *City Fun*, 2:17, 1981, n.p.
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- 101 'The Joys of Oppression', *City Fun*, 3:3, 1982, n.p.
- 102 The Passage, 'Reading Between the Thin Blue Line', *City Fun*, 2:21, 1981, n.p.