Grime Labour

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Grime politics articulates new forms of cross-race working-class identities

Generation Grime came out in full support of Labour in the June 2017 general election. In fact, in their post-election survey, YouGov went so far as to describe age as 'the new dividing line in British politics'. Among first-time voters (eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds), Labour was forty-seven percentage points ahead of the Tories; and amongst twenty to twenty-four-year-olds it was 40 per cent.[1] These younger voters had a significant impact on the outcome of the election.

The interesting and evolving relationship between grime and politics has been central to this sea change, and this in turn needs to be understood within the overall context of the changing interaction between British music and politics over the past forty years. Race and class have played a major role in the politics of popular music throughout this period, and twenty-first century grime represents a coming together, and flowering, of a number of earlier developments. And once Jeremy Corbyn became Labour leader, Labour was finally in a position to connect to, represent and help articulate the voice of this grime generation.

Grime is a genre of music that emerged at the turn of the twenty-first century in inner-city London neighbourhoods.[2] In its early stages, as MCs were spitting (rapping) with British accents over instrumental beats, the sound was most often likened to US hip-hop and rap. But it became 'officially' labelled as its own defined sound in 2002, with More Fire Crew's crossover British chart-topper 'Oi'; while the MOBO (Music of Black Origin) Awards eventually acknowledged it as a genre of music in 2015, with iTunes following suit in 2016.

The sound includes the juxtapositions of intensely heavy baselines, and a

vastness of space which is both futuristic and 'non-musical'.[3] It has a lo-fi sound quality which has been described as a merging of sounds within a song as sounds are absorbed by other sounds.[4] And it has a fast tempo, in general ranging between 136 and 140 beats per minute. Early on, the use of the PlayStation in music-making contributed to the grittiness of grime's sound.[5] This sound has developed as the genre has grown into itself.

Grime is connected, sonically and culturally, to musical predecessors that include music from the British underground scene such as garage and jungle, as well as Jamaican dancehall, electronic/experimental music and punk rock. And it has also always been about more than the music. It is a culture - and this broader cultural significance helps explain why young people voted Labour in such significant numbers in 2017. Although grime originated as a predominantly black British musical form, it has an appeal to young people irrespective of race or ethnicity, because of the connections it makes to working-class experience more generally, and its inclusion of British cultural references. Richard Bramwell describes this process: 'There was a moment in which the grime aesthetic socialised the subjective feelings of a generation of working-class youth in London'.[6] For Bramwell, engaging in grime in live performance settings was a cathartic experience. Grime enabled a collective resistance to the stigmatisation of the working class, and the construction of 'oppositional identities' (p75). And it helped those taking part to make sense of their lives in a wider social context.

This cross-race appeal is also connected to a wider picture of changing identifications in urban areas. Though racism remains pervasive in Britain, its impact is experienced in different ways by Generation Grime, particularly in the inner cities, where people have grown up in a milieu of diverse multicultures, and over time have seen the emergence of new patterns of local identification (partly because of people's experiences of the tensions between global and local influences).[7] Les Back has described the emergence of 'new urban ethnicities' and the making of new heritages - which, as he argues, are be understood as something new, not as the result of the 'mixing' of previous heritages. Back describes these new forms of identification as 'neighbourhood nationalisms'. Belonging to and identifying with a neighbourhood is no longer as strictly tied to racial or ethnic identities: instead it is more reflective of a commitment to the area, and to the length of time people have lived there (p52). He argues that this way of framing ethnicity is radically different from 'the situational

model prevalent within anthropology and the sociology of race relations', because it avoids the tendency to define ethnicity 'in primordial ways', and acknowledges that identity formation is both local and trans-local (p4).

The increasing importance of neighbourhood as a source of identification within multiculture has also been noted by other writers. Simon Jones has argued that living in the multicultural locations that have developed in big cities since the 1960s has had a 'communalising effect', which has strengthened over time;[8] while Ben Ridley has pointed to the importance of location - including postcodes - in the identifications of contemporary young people: it is this that identifies who belongs and who doesn't, insiders and outsiders.[9] Such identifications have had the effect of eroding a sense of belonging based solely on race among younger people.

Rocking against racism

The idea of interracial unity promoted through music started forty years ago, when the musical-political organisation Rock Against Racism (RAR) was set up. The idea had been brewing for some time, but the immediate trigger was Eric Clapton's endorsement of Enoch Powell's racist outburst at his Birmingham Odeon concert in August 1976:

> Stop Britain from becoming a black colony. Get the foreigners out. Get the wogs out. Get the coons out. Keep Britain white. I used to be into dope, now I'm into racism. It's much heavier, man. Fucking wogs, man. Fucking Saudis taking over London. Bastard wogs. Britain is becoming overcrowded and Enoch will stop it and send them all back.

This tirade prompted Red Saunders and friends to write an open letter to the *New Musical Express*, and this, in effect, founded RAR, as a coalition of black and white musicians and fans:

> When we read about Eric Clapton's Birmingham concert when he urged support for Enoch Powell, we nearly puked. Come on Eric … you've been taking too much of the *Daily Express* stuff and you know you can't handle it. Own up. Half your music is black. You're rock

> music's biggest colonist. You're a good musician but where would you be without blues and R&B?
>
> You've got to fight the racist poison otherwise you degenerate into the sewer with the rats and the money men who ripped off rock culture with their cheque books … We want to organise a rank and file movement against the racist poison music. We urge support for Rock Against Racism.[10]

Rock Against Racism campaigned strongly - and pretty successfully - against the National Front, which in the 1970s was for a short period becoming increasingly popular among a small section of the white working class. But these days, those who experience hardship in contemporary multicultural urban settings are less likely to blame their non-white neighbours. (The British National Party (BNP), the National Front's successor organisation as the biggest far right party in Britain, has more or less collapsed, and Ukip, now the party of choice for the BNP's former supporters, has little support in big cities or amongst the under 40s.) There has, however, been a rise in more mainstream versions of xenophobic and anti-immigration attitudes - which are very well represented within the Tory party - but the age profile of right-wing supporters is rising across all parties.

Grime is a working-class scene. It originates amongst the people and places hardest hit by government austerity measures over the last fifteen years: the bedroom tax, schools being placed on special measures, the underfunding of schools, the abolition of the Education Maintenance Allowance, tuition fee rises, zero-hour contracts, dwindling prospects of becoming a homeowner, high rents, increased job insecurity … Those young people able to vote in 2017 voted in response to their lived experience, the government's disregard of their future, and the disconnection they felt with a Conservative Party that hardly recognised them, couldn't relate to their lives and knew little about the localities they called home.

Although RAR started under a Labour government, and was a response to racism in particular rather than to wider social issues, the political climate after Thatcher was elected in 1979 was in many ways similar to that of today. There were increased racial attacks, frozen wages, cuts to the public sector, and soaring prices. In response, the short-lived 2-Tone musical and cultural era that flourished at the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s built on and extended RAR's ideas of

challenging racism and promoting racial unity: this was a musical movement that also faced down sexism and unemployment, while favouring a more generalised anti-Thatcher stance and strongly supporting nuclear disarmament. This was followed in 1985 by the launch of Red Wedge, a collective of politically-oriented musicians and creatives who, with the Labour Party, sought to increase youth engagement and encourage first-time voters. Anti-racism was the initial focus, but Red Wedge also adopted a class focus over time. The aim was to campaign for a fairer world. But it didn't last.[11]

In the intervening three decades, we haven't seen anything similar. In spite of New Labour's invocation of 'Cool Britannia', it had little engagement with working-class youth. The Labour governments of 1997 to 2010 presided over, and contributed to, a growing sense that working-class young people, whether black or white, were a problem: there was the coining of the term NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training), and the implementation of ASBOs and dispersal orders, as well as a number of social exclusion initiatives.[12] Anyone falling into the NEET category was seen as a problem - including enterprising grime artists. From the political class to the mainstream media, there was little or no appreciation that, via grime, young people affected by these issues were promoting their concerns via a collective response.

In 2017, Generation Grime were finally taken notice of in the political arena, when grime artists such as AJ Tracey and Novelist, and rapper Akala, voiced public support for Jeremy Corbyn. AJ Tracey appeared in a Labour campaign video, and singer Rag'n'Bone Man spoke to Channel 4 news about voting Corbyn. This was compounded by renewed interest when Stormzy expressed his liking for Jeremy Corbyn's 'energy' in 2016 (see below), and JME interviewed Corbyn. JME's interview had a significant impact on his social media supporters, despite him not personally endorsing Corbyn.

This is the moment when grime not only became understood as political, but also, consciously or not, when it connected with that earlier punk energy of RAR, the multicultural appeal of 2-Tone and the party politics of Red Wedge.

The organic intellectuals of grime

Artists in the grime scene should be understood as organic intellectuals - as

intellectuals who are organically linked to their class, and take on roles to represent them, theorise their position and offer them a means of political intervention.[13] They have close ties with their communities and are expressive of class identities and aspirations. Writing of a similar musical-political movement, hip-hop, Nelson George describes the use of music as 'a way of announcing one's existence to the world'.[14] Organic intellectuals are the ones who expose private troubles. They are powerful because they connect individualised frustration to a collective experience. Such organic intellectuals are often to be found at the margins of the music industry, and this was generally the case for grime artists - until some of them learnt how to navigate the commercial/underground music industry barrier.[15] In doing so, they managed to maintain their integrity in the scene while enjoying commercial success. That success, however, gives artists an extra modicum of agency - both inside the scene and the communities to which they are connected, and also outside it. They have become the voices of the communities of which they are a part. Crucially, they are central to the scene and are not seen as outsiders: they have come up through the scene and won the respect of their peers. Of particular importance here is the crew, 'the collective of friends'. The crew enables a gathering together to share resources to make music, and offers camaraderie, and in some cases protection from outsiders: it is a microcosm of the collectivity of those involved in the scene. And, while the lyrical content in much of grime may not be obviously political, the lived realities and hardships that are described certainly are. This time around, the artists who are leading a popular movement are from working-class backgrounds. They exist at the intersections of race and class.

Jeremy Corbyn's understanding of racism, poverty and homelessness struck a chord with Generation Grime. This is a generation that has grown up with policies that have effectively quarantined their life chances. Corbyn has returned to a politics that can represent their collective experience via a narrative of fairness, social justice and the redistribution of wealth.

Stormzy has touched on the reasons for Corbyn's appeal:

> I saw some sick picture of him from back in the day when he was campaigning about anti-apartheid and I thought, 'Yeah, I like your energy …'.[16]

Unlike the Blair/Britpop relationship, grime artists' endorsement of Corbyn is from the bottom up. The grime endorsement is led by those who are themselves marginalised, not those who have had a degree of privilege and are now speaking out against injustice on others' behalf. As a result, those involved have a sense of political agency that involves much more than the provision of a musical backdrop to an election campaign.

People powered

Grime artists are unsung heroes. They use their position as organic intellectuals to engage with formal politics and push for change *with* the collective, *for* the collective. Although Labour did not win the election, this was a moment in history that has injected new energy into politics and massively increased political engagement amongst young people.

It has given Generation Grime the opportunity to realise their political power, and, significantly, the means to use it. During the 2017 election campaign, grime artists made significant contributions toward galvanising Generation Grime into political action through social media, including through the use of hashtags such as #Grime4Corbyn. This became a key moment when young people felt they could do something to influence both British society and their own futures. The innovative use of technology, new organising techniques and training programmes inspired by the Bernie Sanders campaign, the chant 'Oh, Jeremy Corbyn', and the viral social media content, enabled social media clicks and shares to be transformed into political action. These tactics were fluid enough to reach out to young people in ways no political party in this country had encountered before.

Corbyn has capitalised on this moment, making himself highly visible in the immediate aftermath of the vote. Thus he made a speech on the 2017 Glastonbury Festival's Pyramid stage, using the platform to promote the idea of unity - offering multiracial unity in direct opposition to Trump's campaign for walls to keep out 'others', in this case primarily Mexicans. He spoke about housing, the environment and racism in a speech that was both measured and charismatic - that's his style - and showed a real connection to the way his supporters were feeling in the current climate, making politics relevant and accessible.

Grenfell

When, in response to the Grenfell fire disaster, Simon Cowell released a charity cover version of Simon and Garfunkel's 'Bridge over Troubled Water', it was led by a Stormzy intro that gave expression to a strong sense of connectivity between communities that live in racialised and classed spaces - those new urban ethnicities. His lyrics show Stormzy's sense of connectedness to those who perished in the fire, as he acknowledges the feeling that it could so easily have been his own family members, or himself, in that building. This sense of human connection to the tragedy is poignant. It speaks to all who live in these kinds of buildings - places where such a tragedy could still be very much a reality, given that so many people still live in high-rise blocks with flammable cladding attached to their exteriors. The intro expresses intense empathy with the realities of the lives destroyed by the fire, as well as a resolve to do something to be part of the solution. It can be understood as part of a process of realising that the Grenfell Tower fire symbolises all that is inhuman within neoliberalism, and that the tragedy must become a political catalyst for the marginalised, as well all who are opposed to the horrors of neoliberalism: the memory of Grenfell will sustain their energy as they push for social change.

Stormzy also used his Glastonbury performance to pay tribute to the Grenfell victims and to demand answers from the government. And a collective of grime artists organised a fundraising event for the survivors of the fire, using the hashtag #Grime4Grenfell. Local grime artist Piki Saku and rap artist Akala used live broadcasting opportunities to challenge the government. They provided a social analysis as to why the fire took place and questioned how it was handled by the authorities, while highlighting the community spirit of the area. Hip-hop and grime artist Lowkey, another local, filmed an interview with a friend who was also a survivor of the fire. This was partly to give his friend a voice, but also to give viewers a first-hand account of what happened. Lowkey emphasised that neoliberalism cost the lives of the poor and racialised; and he raised the issue of who should be held accountable. He also drew attention to government malpractice in the treatment of survivors, particularly regarding rehousing. He called for justice, and - significantly - political mobilisation. Another local grime MC, A.J. Tracey, highlighted the lack of response from both local and central government, the area's gentrification, and the racism that underlies all this. He specifically mentioned Corbyn's proactive response to Grenfell, and declared that this kind of open engagement with the community in

the wake of the tragedy was why people voted for him in 2017, and would continue to have faith in him as the next prime minister.

Significantly, and unlike leadership behaviour in previous pop and politics collaborations for social change, Corbyn engages directly with both musicians and the communities they come from. Red Wedge sought to be the middleman between the youth and politicians, and thus generate youth interest in politics. In Cool Britannia Blair sought an aesthetic. Corbyn rejects both these approaches: rather, he works directly with and for communities, in person. He has been doing this for decades as a dedicated campaigner, and it is this authenticity which makes him so attractive to the youth, and to marginalised communities and others who reject the policies of our current government. He fights for fairness. His use of social media ensures he has direct access to the public and makes himself accountable. He attempts to engage with people in the 'everyday', to be relevant. Corbyn's sentiments regarding the Grenfell tragedy stood in stark contrast to those of the Conservative government, and demonstrated his affinity with those affected. He visited the victims and the area. He used social media to speak out against the tragedy as it relates to social stratification, as well as the handling of Grenfell survivors by the authorities. He made the public aware that he was contacting the government to push for survivors to be included in the public inquiry. People who had felt ignored for too long now feel listened to.

Ooohhhh Jeh-Reh-Mi Corbyn

Corbyn is actively engaging with young people and popular culture. His openness is authentic, and, as a result, attractive. But Corbyn's way of engaging with popular culture is very different from Blair's. Blair was very active with pop culture and popstars in the lead-up to the general election in 1997, when he attended the Q Awards and the music industry BPI annual meeting. And he was strongly linked with Britpop, which was seen as a reconnection with the British rock and roll of the 1960s. But this music was accepted into the mainstream, rather than being seen as an alternative to the mainstream, a counter culture. Indeed, many Britpop musicians enjoyed and made full use of the money, culture, fashion and media opportunities their mainstream income afforded them. This union of pop and politics was strategic on the part of Blair's campaign.[17] The Labour Party sought to control the dynamic,

however: they did not want the political organising that Red Wedge was allowed to pursue in the early years of Neil Kinnock's leadership. And there are plenty in the party today who remain suspicious of an autonomous socio-cultural movement - that #Grime4Corbyn could yet become for, but not of, Labour.

In his book *Walls Come Tumbling Down*, Daniel Rachel makes the point that Red Wedge 'was teaching the Labour party how to listen'.[18] By engaging with Generation Grime on its own terms, this is the tradition that Corbyn has adopted. Equally, now that grime has become attractive to the middle classes, and is straddling the mainstream-versus-counterculture dividing-line, grime artists have remained connected to real community issues. Grime does not get particularly caught up in celebrity for the purposes of marketing or conspicuous consumption;[19] and this is a departure from the fancy and aspirational lifestyle practices, and upward mobility, of its immediate predecessor, UK garage. Grime is primarily an underground genre: much 'harsher, grittier, [it reflects] the world as it [is] rather than a varnished, romanticised version of the truth'.[20] It is the voice of those 'left behind'. It reflects the economic hardships of the areas it came from, and in their lyrical content its emerging artists openly declare an oppositional worldview as its ethos.

To paraphrase the founder of modern sociology, C. Wright Mills, grime articulates the public issues that shape collective private troubles. It is the voice of those hardest hit, responding to political decisions made by government. Although there remains within the scene a desire for economic success and security, and it was an enterprising ingenuity that first created and then expanded the scene, this is not a culture founded on hyper-individualism. The success achieved by those in the scene by one person is viewed as a success for all, for the 'endz'. Individual achievement produces collective pride: grime's success is collective. And this collectivity contributes to people's sense of identity and culture, and melds together the successful individual and the collective. Community is also fostered through the collective experience of hardship. Grime has for some time gone it alone, but, now that someone - Jeremy Corbyn - is recognising their realities, artists are encouraging people to use more traditional channels to express their political concerns, while also retaining the agency they have had to develop themselves as a result of previous governments' marginalising policies, and their proven ability to self-organise.

Thus, grime's potential is located somewhere between the aesthetic of Blair's incorporation of Britpop and the day-to-day grassroots political organising of the

Red Wedge tours. This is neither an attempt to make Corbyn cool nor to 'sex up' the party with a decent soundtrack. It's something different. We're just not quite sure what, yet.

Both the general election and Labour's response to the Grenfell tragedy could be the start of an ongoing dialogue and sustained political engagement amongst not just young people but also older, equally disillusioned, voters. And grime artists could play a major role in this process: they remain very much connected to their communities, albeit organising in sporadic, informal, even anarchic ways that sit uneasily with the traditional Labour Party methods.

Young people understand branding and instant gratification. They exist in a world where attention and concentration are competed for as standard. But the same technology that entices them into the market also enables a way for people to attempt more for themselves, unaided. The shift grime is making may also create the space for more overtly political lyrical content and imagery in artistic expression, for both established and emerging artists.

But Labour will need to listen if it is to remain tuned into the obvious potential. Listen, do not seek to take over.

Generation Grime's actions in 2017 made everyone sit up and take notice. Can Labour learn the lessons? Grenfell made public the devastating impact of neoliberal agendas. Now there is the possibility of a government that will govern #ForTheManyNotTheFew. To achieve this, Generation Grime wants a *relatable* leader. Labour's 2017 manifesto suggested that it was beginning to understand the pressures of existing policy on the working classes; and Jeremy Corbyn is viewed as someone who promotes the issues that young people see as necessary for the improvement of their life chances: the abolition of tuition fees, extra funding for the NHS, an increase in the number of new homes, the scrapping of the bedroom tax, and the abolition of income thresholds for spouses of migrants, whilst asking the more wealthy to pay more tax, so as to create a fairer, more inclusive, country.

Since the 2017 general election, Generation Grime has begun to realise its political power. Led by Corbyn, but shoulder to shoulder with him as an equal, we want to push forward for a fairer Britain, built by effective local organising and sustained community engagement. But if Corbyn is to be the political hope, he and the Labour Party must engage with #TheMany under what I term 'Corbynism as

Organism'. We must work together as a functioning whole. This means that Labour supporters and the left more widely must engage with each other, and remain committed to community, and to the idea of fundamental rights for everyone. We must straddle government and grass roots activism, and we must connect both online and in physical space. The Labour Party (including one that leads a future government) must clearly signpost its loyalties. It must make engagement with the political process easier and the process itself more representative. If not, there remains the danger that it will once more lose the support of young people.

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Monique Charles has written widely on grime and politics. Her PhD at Warwick University was entitled 'Hallowed be thy Grime?: A musicological and sociological genealogy of Grime music and its relation to Black Atlantic religious discourse'.

Notes

1. YouGov, 'How Britain voted at the 2017 General Election', www.yougov.uk. 13 June 2017.

2. See Monique Charles, 'Grime Central!: Subterranean Ground-In Grit Engulfing Manicured Mainstream Spaces', in Kehinde Andrews and Lisa Palmer (eds), *Blackness in Britain*, Routledge 2016.

3. See Paul Sullivan, *Remixology: Tracing the Dub Diaspora*, Reaktion Books 2013; Julian Henriques, *Sonic Bodies: Reggae Sound Systems, Performance Techniques and Ways of Knowing*, Continuum 2011; Lloyd Bradley, *Sounds like London: 100 Years of Black Music in the Capital*, Serpent's Tail 2012.

4. David Machin, *Analysing Popular Music: Image, Sound, Text*, Sage 2010.

5. See, for example, Andrew Missingham, *Why console-games are bigger than rock'n'roll: What the music sector needs to know and how it can get a piece of the action*, Youth Music Organisation, London 2007; see also Paul Lester, *Bonkers: The Story of Dizzee Rascal*, Omnibus Press 2010.

6. Richard Bramwell, *UK Hip-Hop Grime and the City: The Aesthetics and Ethics of London's Rap Scenes*, Routledge 2015, p33.

7. See Les Back, *New Ethnicities and Urban Culture*, UCL Press 1996.

8. Simon Jones, *Black Culture White Youth*, Palgrave MacMillan 1988, pp127-8.

9. Ben Gidley, 'Youth Culture and Ethnicity: Emerging Youth Interculture in South London', in Paul Hodkinson and Wolfgang Deicke (eds), *Youth Cultures: Scenes, Subcultures and Tribes*, Routledge 2009.

10. See Roger Huddle and Red Saunders, *Reminiscences of RAR: Rocking against Racism 1976-82*, Redwords 2016.

11. See Daniel Rachel, *Walls Come Tumbling Down: The Music and Politics of Rock against Racism, 2-Tone and Red Wedge*, Picador 2016.

12. Joy White, *Urban Music and Entrepreneurship: Beats, Rhymes and Young People's Enterprise*, Routledge, 2016; Chris Shannahan, 'Excluded Urban Youth and Religious Discourse in the Trans-local City Theoretical Framework', Dept. of Theology and Religion, University of Birmingham 2009.

13. Katina Stapleton, 'From the Margins to Mainstream: the Political Power of Hip-Hop', *Media, Culture and Society*, Vol. 20 No. 2, April 1998.

14. Nelson George, *Hip Hop America*, Penguin 1999, p14.

15. See Barry Stoller, 'Music, Marxism, and the hype about D.I.Y. ("Do-It-Yourself")', *Monthly Review*, Vol. 49 No. 7, 1998; George Maher, 'Brechtian Hip Hop: Didactics and Self production in Post-Gangsta Political Mixtapes', *Journal of Black Studies*, Issue 36, 2005.

16. Quoted in Sam Wolfson, 'Stormzy: "My man Corbyn! I dig what he says"', *Guardian* 21 May 2016: www.theguardian.com/music/2016/may/21/stormzy-grime-skepta-kanye-drake.

17. See John Harris, *The Last Party: Britpop, Blair and the Demise of English Rock*, Fourth Estate, 2003.

18. *Walls Come Tumbling Down*, pxxiv.

19. See Thorstein Veblen, *Conspicuous Consumption: Unproduction Consumption of Goods Is Honourable*, Penguin 2006.

20. *Bonkers: The Story of Dizzee Rascal*, p26.