**Espresso in Bohemia:**

**Soho, Coffee Bars and Youth Culture in the 1950s**

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**Niall McDermott**

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# Abstract

This dissertation is an exploration of the coffee bar phenomenon that emerged and operated in Soho in the 1950s. It argues that the Soho coffee bars and their occupation by young people were a product of the cultural and economic context of the 1950s. The emergence of coffee bars is considered in relation to the mental and material space of Soho and how this facilitated the emergence of the coffee bar as a space of youth culture. Special consideration is given to the Partisan Coffee House as a unique response to the emergence of youth culture and changes in British society on behalf of radical Left politics.

# Introduction

This dissertation is an exploration of the coffee-bar phenomenon that emerged in Soho in the 1950s, and its relationship to an emergent youth culture and changing socioeconomic conditions of that decade. The Soho coffee-bar bar is a useful focal point to consider the intersection of a number of social, political and cultural currents; namely, the condition of post-war Britain; a process of Americanisation in British consumer culture; changing patterns of immigration and cosmopolitanism; the literary work of the ‘angry young men’; relationships between the musical worlds of Skiffle and Jazz; Bohemianism; radical politics; and the role of Soho as a mental and material space. This dissertation gives consideration to the cultural and economic contexts that gave rise to the espresso bar phenomenon of the 1950s and explores how espresso bars in Soho emerged and operated as a site of subversive youth culture and radical politics.

The ‘espresso revolution’ of the 1950s sparked immediate interest and excitement as a topic of research. A chapter in Markman Ellis’ *The Coffee-House: A Cultural History*, entitled ‘Angry Young Men and the Espresso Revolution’, situated the coffee-bar directly at the centre of the cultural upheaval happening amongst young people in the capital that reverberated out to provincial cities and towns.[[1]](#footnote-2) Ellis links the coffee bars of the 1950s to the literary output of the Angry Young Men, particularly John Osborne and Colin Wilson, and, briefly, with the do-it-yourself musical developments of skiffle. Ellis also examines the Partisan Coffee House as the New Left’s response to the problem of youth in the 1950s. Ellis’ work briefly mentions that Soho was the geographical and spiritual centre of the newly emerging coffee-bar culture. This revelation prompted questions of cultural geography and spatial practice that provide the intellectual framework for this dissertation’s investigation into the role of place and space. Ellis’ study is only a brief chapter however, and the purpose of this thesis is to provide a more in-depth study of the coffee bar phenomenon of 1950s Soho. That no such study has so far been undertaken is both surprising and illuminating. Coffee bars get little more than a passing mention in many studies of youth culture. What this work hopes to do is to synthesise the connected threads associated with the cultures of youth and coffee bars in a way that unveils the relationships that tie them together.

The history of the coffee bars is one of plurality, diversity and complexity. The coffee-bars of Soho reflected the space, place and time in which they took form, and this work argues that they were a unique manifestation of this specific cultural, economic and spatial context. The dissertation will show how the emergence of the coffee bars and the cultural milieu that surrounded them, was a product of the specific social, economic and cultural context of the post-war period; and the specific space of Soho and its enduring legacy of bohemianism, its architecture, and its cosmopolitanism. The combination of these factors culminated in a unique type of commercial and social space intrinsically tied with teenagers and youth culture.

The coffee bar phenomenon is closely associated with the emergence of youth culture in the 1950s, though as will be explored they were not wholly occupied by teenagers and young people. The association with youth, reinforced by media coverage and cultural representations, is an integral part of the coffee bar story. The development of the coffee bar scene and its relationship to youth culture can be understood in relation to the growing economic power of young people and the apparent affluent society of mid-1950s Britain. Contemporary responses to the growth of youth consumerism include Mark Abrams’ market research report *The Teenage Consumer* and Richard Hoggart’s *The Uses of Literacy,* a lament for the decline of traditional working-class culture and the rise of Americanised mass-consumerism.[[2]](#footnote-3) What these works have in common is that they are both analyses of the relationship between young people, consumer culture and the resultant changes in British society. The links between affluence, youth and consumerism that Abrams and Hoggart explore are key themes that connect the various strands of this dissertation together. These studies are useful for understaning contemporary attitudes and responses to the growth of youth culture and consumerism from the lens of state institutions and major political parties. They are indicative of a generational divide between young people and older generations, one created or intensified by this combination of youth and consumer cultures.

The Partisan Coffee House, the New Left’s own 'anti-expresso bar’, serves as a useful case study to examine the impact of the affluent society and Cold War politics on youth culture in this dissertation. It represents a unique coming together of young people, politics and culture, one that is intimately tied to the political and cultural context of the 1950s. The story of the Partisan is one where the spheres of politics, music, literature, art, and bohemianism collided in Soho in the 1950s. The Partisan, while unique among the Soho coffee bars, is arguably the one that best examples to explore both the cultural significance of the coffee bars, and the intersecting social, political and cultural contexts that shaped them.

Much of the existing historiography of the coffee bar phenomenon of the 1950s has been depicted its rise as intrinsically linked to the growth of youth culture in postwar Britain. The historiography of youth culture offers several different perspectives but there is a common thread of continuity versus change in the historical debate. This thesis engages with the work of key scholars who have forwarded continuous and discontinuous analyses of youth culture

Bill Osgerby in *Youth in Britain since 1945* takes a nuanced approach that recognises elements of continuity in youth culture, tied to continuing social and economic trends, that stretch back to the late nineteenth century. However, Osgerby argues that the dramatic transformations of social, political and economic life in the postwar era served to highlight the emergence of youth as a distinct social category. Osgerby argues that ‘the concept of youth is a social construct – a subjective set of cultural characteristics shaped by the social, economic and political conditions of a particular historical context.’[[3]](#footnote-4) From this perspective, Osgerby explores the changing concepts of youth and responses to the ‘youth problem’ in postwar Britain, highlighting its shifting and dynamic nature. In his analysis of the 1950s he explores the emergence of the ‘teenager’ in relation to the prevailing contemporary discourses of affluence and consumption.

Osgerby argues that coffee-bars were the ‘pre-eminent focal point to British teenage life’ from the mid-1950s, noting how the most famous coffee bars were based in London, such as the Two I’s and the Gyre and Gimble.[[4]](#footnote-5) He cites the freedom and accessibility of coffee bars - to chat and dance to records for the price of an espresso – as an important factor in their establishment as a focal point in teenage life. The cosmopolitanism of the coffee-bars reflected the growing influence of European, especially Italian, aesthetics, that also manifested itself in the fashion of the ‘modernists’ and the rise of Carnaby Street as the home of mod culture.[[5]](#footnote-6) Osgerby also examines the moral concerns raised by girls spending evenings away at coffee bars, outside of the parental gaze, and argues that the representation of such anxieties in media coverage overstated the extent of changes in sexual attitudes and behaviours.[[6]](#footnote-7) He points to Soho as a locus for the ‘beats’, bohemians and the counter-culture, thanks to its relaxed ‘cultural ambience’, and notes how the beats became associated with Soho in the public consciousness and thus associated with existential philosophy, jazz and CND of this youth subculture during the late 1950s.[[7]](#footnote-8) This link to bohemianism and a nascent counter-culture is significant in considering the non-conformist cultural associations of 1950s Soho, but also the position of the Partisan Coffee House with its ties to CND and radical politics.

David Fowler argues that youth culture emerged as a distinct category in British society in the 1920s, emphasising the continuity between the youth movements of the 1920s and the culture of youth that developed further in the 1950s and sixties. Fowler shares with Arthur Marwick a view of ‘youth as agent, not as object’ and concentrates this study on young single adults in the 18-25 age group including working-class youth and middle-class university students.[[8]](#footnote-9) Fowler explores the ‘individuals, institutions and cults’ that shaped the lives of young adults from 1920 to the 1960s, emphasising the importance of the pre-WWII period in the development of youth culture. Fowler argues that youth culture transcends class, noting examples of cross-class collaborations in the 1920s and 1930s, but that age or generational divisions appeared in youth culture at different times.[[9]](#footnote-10)

Fowler engages in an analysis of Richard Hoggart’s *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), which itself engages in an analysis of 1950s youth culture in Britain, particularly the Americanisation and consumerism of coffee bars and milk bars in Northern England. Fowler criticises Hoggart’s lack of historical perspective for not looking beyond 1950 as a starting point, instead stressing the origins of youth cultures in the 1920s and the role of university students and middle-class youths in shaping youth culture in this period.[[10]](#footnote-11) Fowler does not engage with the coffee-bar phenomenon or with the cultural role of Soho in any way, instead emphasises the importance of provincial towns, universities and middle-class youth in shaping the direction of youth culture over a longer period. The use of Fowler’s analysis for this study is that it stresses long term processes in the development of youth culture as opposed to a category that emerged purely in the post-war period. While this study takes a different line of argument, the expression of youth culture that emerged in coffee bars also has elements of continuity that will be explored.

Arthur Marwick’s well-known monograph *The Sixties* and article ‘Youth in Britain, 1920-1960: Detachment and Commitment’ published in 1970 share with Fowler a conception of youth as agent not object, however his parameters are more loosely defined – concentrating on young adults but also including teenagers and young married couples.[[11]](#footnote-12) For Marwick, the increased influence of youth culture on society was part of a wider cultural revolution over the course of the long sixties. Marwick also emphasises the subcultural structure of youth; considering the breadth of ages involved youth culture cannot be a monolith.[[12]](#footnote-13) The importance Marwick places on the role of youth in shaping the cultural revolution of the long sixties puts his argument in line with that of Osgerby, recognising the transformational effects of the period on youth culture and vice-versa.

Marwick’s article on detachment and commitment is particularly relevant because it analyses two key themes of the early New Left. Marwick explores the swing toward and drift away from political commitment amongst young people from: the detachment of the 1920s; the commitment to ‘brave causes’ of the Left in the 1930s; the post-war malaise and apathy of the late 1940s and early 1950s represented by the writings of the Angry Young Men; and the reaction to this apathy by the New Left in the late 1950s. The dynamic nature of youth culture and its responses to political, social and economic developments is useful for considering how the coffee bar phenomenon emerged in a period of detachment and apparent affluence and classlessness of the mid-1950s.

Dominic Sandbrook, like David Fowler, in his study of the long sixties sees youth culture not as something that emerged in the post-war period but that the problems of youth had roots in the 1920s and 1930s and argues for ‘fundamental continuity with older periods of British history.’[[13]](#footnote-14) Sandbrook’s revisionist approach to the long sixties and youth culture, disputes the assertions of Marwick that this was a period of profound and intense change Sandbrook takes the invasion of the Suez Canal as his starting point for the long sixties in Britain. He makes extensive use of popular culture references to support his contention for continuities in political and cultural life in Britain - the Angry Young Men, skiffle groups and coffee bars are all addressed within this context of continuity of culture in the mid-1950s.

In Sandbrook’s view, ‘the coffee bar was emblematic of youth culture in the late 1950s, reflecting the trend of increasing affluence and projecting the values of elusive sophistication.’[[14]](#footnote-15) He roots the coffee bars firmly in the cosmopolitan and bohemian cultural geography of Soho. The mix of Continental restaurants and delicatessens, jazz clubs, artists‘ drinking-dens like the Colony Room and a long legacy as a centre for bohemianism and louche behaviour are given as evidence of this cultural geography. Sandbrook also places significant emphasis on the role of Italian immigrants in the 1950s, and the culinary cluster they established on the streets around Old Compton Street, as key to the development of coffee bars. Given the proximity of the first coffee bars to this Italian cluster, his argument appears to be a sound one; however, it somewhat undermines his continuity thesis given the sharp increase of Italian immigration to Britain in the 1950s. For Sandbrook, coffee bars were indicative of a growing enthusiasm for all things continental that was changing culinary and aesthetic tastes across Britain, and their modernist styling, exemplified by chrome Gaggia espresso machines, attracted young people just emerging from the austerity of post-war British life.[[15]](#footnote-16) Sandbrook contextualises the coffee bar in an age of increasing affluence and cosmopolitanism, but he also stresses the continuity of the leisure pursuits and consumption patterns of most young people.[[16]](#footnote-17) Sandbrook’s argument then illustrates the complex nature of youth culture and, like Arthur Marwick, makes a case for looking at the coffee bars of the 1950s as a part of a subcultural structure rather than a monolithic popular youth culture.

Kate Bradley has argued that that the London coffee-bar in the 1950s became a space in which the presence of working-class youth challenged traditional British forms of recreation and socialisation.[[17]](#footnote-18) Bradley highlights how the presence of strong foreign influences, including American-style food and music, and Italian-style coffee, was met with suspicion and a sense of moral decline by older generations and official institutions. She argues that the coffee bar represented a space for young people to autonomously express themselves and construct identities, away from parental or school supervision. Bradley notes Soho’s reputation as a bohemian and disruptive space, but that it also represented a space which offered escape and refuge from the tough working-class neighbourhoods of the East End. The sense of escape and difference is a useful analogy when considering the pivotal role that Soho played in the development of this expression of youth culture.

Soho is the geographical focus of this thesis. While coffee bars expanded out of this square mile zone in central London to provincial towns and cities all over Britain, Soho is the hub of the coffee bar phenomenon, mentally and materially. Soho is not only where the first coffee bars opened in the early part of the decade, its environs became a concentrated hub of espresso bars and became intrinsically linked with coffee bars through representations in the national press, in films and on stage. Frank Mort and Judith Walkowitz are two historians whose work has explored Soho and its unique cultural geography in different periods. Their work shaped the direction of this thesis, through their emphasis on the importance of the spatial characteristics and cultural legacy of Soho in relation to the development of the coffee bars and associated youth culture in the 1950s.

Frank Mort has published two books that have informed the spatial considerations of this thesis considerably: *Capital Affairs: London and the Making of the Permissive Society* (2010); and *Cultures of Consumption: Masculinities and Social Space in Late Twentieth-Century Britain* (1996). *Capital Affairs* explores changing attitudes of sexuality, morality and permissiveness in the context of austerity and affluence in 1950s and sixties in London. Mort makes the case for the *longue durée* in the transformation of social, sexual and cultural life in the post-war period, challenging ideas of discontinuity and progressive readings of the period by highlighting the continued influence of Victorian values and policies in British life.[[18]](#footnote-19) While this thesis does not concentrate particularly on issues of sexuality and permissiveness, Mort illustrates how sexuality and the particular urban landscape of Soho were deeply intertwined - the alleys and courtyards encouraging particular forms of social and sexual behaviours, and those behaviours then shaped the cultural and imagined landscape of Soho.[[19]](#footnote-20) Mort’s analysis of the material and mental spaces of Soho and their continued reproduction, has guided the approach to considering the role of Soho in the story of the coffee bars. The imagined space of Soho and its reproduction through film, guidebooks, photography and other cultural practices is given consideration in this dissertation, as the representations provide insight into how the Soho coffee bars and their habitués were portrayed and perceived.

Mort dedicates one chapter in both of his books to explorations of Soho’s cultural geography through the lenses of cosmopolitanism, bohemianism and consumption. ‘Cosmopolitanism’ in *Capital Affairs* isan analysis of Soho as an ‘exotic foreign quarter’ - a mixture of Jewish and Continental immigrants, domestic bohemians, local entrepreneurs and tourists interacting with the specific built environment of Soho to create a distinct cultural atmosphere. Mort utilises the spatial theories of Michel de Certeau to analyse Soho’s material and mental geography. Mort highlights the role of Georgian architecture in and around Soho Square in fostering a romantic mythology of the area that evoked the ghosts of former habitués like William Hogarth and Thomas de Quincey.[[20]](#footnote-21) He also points to the effects that nineteenth century material interventions had - the building of Regent Street and Shaftesbury Avenue - in enclosing Soho within four main boundaries and thus reinforcing a sense of separateness or otherness of Soho from the wider West End both physically and mentally.

Mort’s earlier work, *Cultures of Consumption,* dedicates a chapter to the spatial culture of Soho. The title ‘Soho: Archaeologies of Bohemia’ underlines the emphasis on continuity implicit throughout Mort’s work. Mort digs down through layers of Soho’s bohemian history and how this legacy structured Soho’s later development as a space of consumption. Mort points to the symbolic importance of this bohemian legacy in providing a cultural zone for new forms of consumption and masculine identities to take root, including the coffee bars and associated subcultures of the 1950s.[[21]](#footnote-22) The plurality and contested nature of Soho as a social space that Mort identifies is also influential in shaping an analysis of the coffee bars that recognises their heterogeneity, which is expressed in the diversity of their design and clientele.

Judith Walkowitz’s *Nights Out: Life in Cosmopolitan London* (2012) also views Soho through the lens of cosmopolitanism. Like Mort, Walkowitz explores the spatial geography of Soho and its implications for developments of social and cultural life, commercial fortunes and patterns of consumption. Walkowitz’s study spans from the late Victorian period until 1945, she offers no comment on the rise of coffee bars as they did not appear until the early 1950s. However this monograph is still relevant for its analysis of the changing meanings of cosmopolitanism and Soho’s role in shaping those meaning. Walkowitz adds a temporal dimension to her analysis of Soho’s spatial geography, underlining the importance of nightlife and the night-time economy – dancing, sex, food, fashion, music - in shaping Soho’s cultural identity. The transformation of Soho over the course of a day, from a grubby foreign enclave into a bustling metropolitan scene by night, is given as an example of the movement, mobility and flux that defined Soho.[[22]](#footnote-23)

Walkowitz, like Mort, uses the language and methodologies of critical geographers, particularly Michel de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre, in her reading of Soho’s physical space. She explores the boundaries and peripheries of Soho and the effects they had on movement of people in and out of Soho. Her evocation of Virginia Woolf’s routes through Soho recalls the ‘walker’ of de Certeau’s work, responding to the strategies of Victorian planning (the building of the boulevards) and charting her own path through the narrow streets and alleys of Soho.[[23]](#footnote-24) Soho’s built environment, particularly the preservation of its Georgian character, plays a key role in her depiction of Soho as a site of interaction, tension and competition between different groups and cultures: old and new; rich and poor; homosexuals and heterosexuals; uneducated and academics; and the domestic and the foreign. The lack of material intervention differentiated Soho from the surrounding West End, reinforced ideas of Soho’s detachment from London and in tandem with its exotic economies, acted as a site of cultural exchange between social groups high and low.

Aside from Mort and Walkowitz, there have been two key texts on Soho that have informed the approach to the place and space of Soho taken in this dissertation. The first is journalist and essayist Arthur Ransome’s *Bohemia in London* (1907), in which he traces back the history of artistic and creative life in London, recalling the 1860s and 1870s as decades when London rivalled Paris as a capital of high bohemia. *Bohemia in London* is an account of avant-garde literary and artistic life in London, of young people living unorthodox lifestyles, and Soho is the centre of their bohemian world. Yet Ransome describes bohemia as a ‘tint in the spectacles’; a space whose mental construction is more pronounced than its physical characteristics.[[24]](#footnote-25)

The second text is, writer and broadcaster, Daniel Farson’s *Soho in the Fifties* (1987).[[25]](#footnote-26) Farson was a famous habitué of Soho’s pubs and private members clubs such as the French and the Colony Room. Farson’s memoirs follow the template set down by Ransome, his assertion that Soho was a ‘state of mind’ echoing Ransome’s tint in the spectacles. *Soho in the 1950s* recreates the bohemianism of Farson, Francis Bacon and Jeffrey Bernard. In many ways it celebrates the bad-behaviour and self-destruction as the last era of true bohemianism in Soho. Farson’s depiction of this era in Soho, asserts the area’s sense of foreignness and difference from the rest of London; a bohemian island in the dull cultural landscape of post-war Britain. Both Farson and Ransome underline the importance of understanding Soho’s imaginative construction and the possibilities this created for cultural interaction and exchange. This unique cultural atmosphere is a key dimension that begins to explain why the coffee bars emerged and thrived in Soho in the 1950s.

Given the geographical focus of this dissertation is on Soho, a specific yet still ambiguously defined zone in London’s West End, the intellectual framework on which this study rests is provided by philosophers and theorists who have analysed the active role of place and space in sociocultural relations and the historical process. As has already been discussed above, the considerations of Soho’s spatial dimensions by Walkowitz and Mort are heavily informed by the work of Michel de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre on modern urban space and everyday life. De Certeau appears as the key influence in both scholars writing on Soho, particularly his theories of spatial practices and panopticism. De Certeau’s theories are especially useful for considering the impact of Soho’s urban environment and its relationships to its boundaries and peripheral zones. De Certeau uses the example of looking down at Manhattan from the 110th floor of the World Trade Centre to illustrate the voyeuristic nature of state/administrative power, lifted above and abstracted from the practices of [[26]](#footnote-27)￼ Panopticism, an idea advanced by Michel Foucault in his work on prisons, is based around the operation of power and control from[[27]](#footnote-28)￼ In de Certeau’s conception, panoptic strategies are met with resistance through tactics or practices in the spaces of the city, such as the routes people choose to walk, and that these spatial practices ‘secretly structure the determining conditions of social life[[28]](#footnote-29)￼ As Walkowitz and Mort both discuss, the building or modernising of the four main thoroughfares around Soho in the nineteenth century, had the effect of reshaping Soho’s geography and the commercial economies surrounding it, while the absence of intervention in Soho itself served to reaffirm the area's sense of cultural difference[[29]](#footnote-30)￼ Looking at the coffee bars and youth culture of 1950s through the lens of strategy and spatial practice, this thesis will make the argument that Soho’s material and mental space was an essential component in the development of this cultural phenomenon.

The translation into English of Henri Lefebvre's book *The Production of Space* in 1991 brought increasing focus to matters of space and place into historical scholarship particularly in the sub-genre of Urban History.[[30]](#footnote-31) Lefebvre straddled the line between many intellectual disciplines - philosophy, urbanism, sociology, geography, literary criticism, politics - and his writing is dense, repetitious, metaphysical and complex. The space of capitalism is the key theme of this work and his conception of what constitutes capitalist space is one of concrete abstraction - an idea that comes into being through social, cultural, economic and political practice.[[31]](#footnote-32) Lefebvre saw space as existing in a tripartite tension between spatial practices, representation of spaces (plans, maps, designs - that seek to organise social relations) and representational spaces (places of imagination and resistance). Space, therefore, is produced through social relations and this space is then active in the production of social relations, creating an ongoing process of reproduction of space. The space of capitalism therefore produces its own form of space, which Lefebvre deems ‘abstract space’ (plans, schedules) that enables and facilitates the processes of production and consumption. The architecture and physical environment of the city, in Lefebvre’s analysis, enables and encourages particular forms of social relations whilst excluding other forms of social relations through planning and material interventions e.g. building of bridges or boundaries. [[32]](#footnote-33)

Lefebvre wrote that ‘every society – and hence every mode of production...produces a space, its own space.’[[33]](#footnote-34) This is a particularly useful tool for thinking about the coffee bars in the context of the postwar society of Britain, which was in the early 1950s still dealing with austerity and rationing but as the decade progressed ideas of the consumer society and affluence became increasingly prevalent. The transformations of British society in the postwar period - the creation of the welfare state, the building of new towns, the growth of youth culture and consumerism - all contributed to moulding the space and time in which the coffee bars took root. Lefebvrian theory can also be used in a localised manner to consider the specific spatial qualities of Soho and the spaces of the coffee bars themselves.

As Mort and Walkowitz demonstrate, planners and administrators reshaped the West End in the nineteenth century with four major thoroughfares serving the interests of consumerism and entertainment: shopping on Regent and Oxford Streets on the north and west; and the theatres on the south end at Leicester Square served by Charing Cross Road. The space of Soho was reshaped literally, the parishes of St Anne and St James were effectively pushed together by the building of Regent Street, and figuratively by its relationship to the commercial and entertainment zone of the West End, an area transformed while somehow retaining its old character when the streets around it were reconfigured. Then there were the changes of the twentieth century that further reshaped Soho, including wartime bomb damage and several different waves of immigration. Immigration profoundly reshaped the commercial space of Soho itself bringing exotic restaurants and delicatessens to the streets around Old Compton Street. The coffee bars themselves can be viewed in Lefebvrian terms as representational spaces for the young people who frequented them. Spaces in which they could listen to the jukebox or skiffle bands and interact with their peers outside of parental or state supervision. The example of the Partisan Coffee House, discussed in detail in chapter 2, was a representational space to young people on the Left alienated by Cold war orthodoxies and it provided a physical and spiritual home for the early New Left.

The works of Doreen Massey and David Harvey on cities, space and modernity have also been influential on the spatial analysis of Soho and its role in the development of coffee bars. Doreen Massey was a Marxist cultural geographer who argued for considering a global context in an analysis of place and space, linking one place to other places, ‘What we need, it seems to me, is a global sense of the local, a global sense of place.’[[34]](#footnote-35) The place and space of Soho in the 1950s was shaped, in large part, by different waves of immigration, from across Europe and from the colonies. Therefore, the processes of globalisation and decolonisation have a direct influence on the construction of Soho’s social and cultural space. Soho’s reputation for bohemianism also links it to places in the world with similar legacies, such as the Left Bank in Paris or Greenwich Village in New York City. The global-local relationship Massey espouses is a useful tool for examining Soho’s role in the emergence of the 1950s coffee bars. It is also useful for unpicking how processes of globalisation and increasing mobility influenced the development of the coffee bar and its own spatial attributes, for example the importation of American music and culture, Italian espresso machines, or coffee beans shipped from across the tropics.[[35]](#footnote-36)

David Harvey is another Marxist geographer whose work on space stresses the domination of space and time by capital. His book on the rise of postmodern cultural forms in the 1970s and 1980s is a materialist analysis of the shifts in perception of space and time throughout the periods of modernity into postmodernity.[[36]](#footnote-37) Harvey’s analysis examines the ’positivistic, technocentric, and rationalistic’ character of high modernity and how this manifested itself through large-scale planning, architecture, infrastructure.[[37]](#footnote-38) The role of modernist planning in shaping the peripheral zones, yet the absence of it within Soho, is an example of how this affected the area. However, Harvey also stresses the subjectivity and plurality of space in the city, noting how different groups have different perceptions of space.[[38]](#footnote-39) This is highly useful when considering the heterogeneity of the many subcultures or scenes that inhabited the spaces of the Soho coffee bars, and how there were multiple readings of the coffee bars and of Soho as social and cultural spaces.

This dissertation has been structured to first contextualise the emergence of Soho’s coffee bars within the shifting cultural, economic and political conditions of the 1950s, before analysing their formation and representation. Chapter 1 provides more detailed background on the cultural, political and economic landscape of the period, which frames the content of later chapters. It explores issues of austerity and rationing, immigration, and the rise of youth and consumer culture towards the middle of the decade. It offers more detail about the space and place of Soho in London, and the important role it played in providing a material and mental home for the coffee bars. It then analyses the origins of the first coffee bars in Soho, the importance of the espresso machine to their emergence, and then compares the architecture and design traits of different coffee bars.

Chapter 2 presents a case study of the Partisan Coffee House. The Partisan was part of the first New Left’s attempts to actively engage with youth culture. The chapter begins by examining the history of the first New Left and contextualises the movement within the events of 1956, and in welfare-state Britain. It engages with the work of Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, in seeking to understand the New Left’s attitude towards consumerism and youth culture. It embarks on a discussion the spatial practices of the Partisan; the events and activities that took place there, and its role as a hub for CND. The chapter explores many features of the Partisan’s short life: the design; the management; the food and drink; the fundraising; and its demise. The Partisan Coffee House is understood here as part of wider response to the transformations of political, economic and cultural life in 1950s Britain. It also reflects the geopolitical developments of the Cold War and decolonisation, through the events in Hungary and Suez.

The third chapter examines the cultural associations and practices associated with the coffee bars. It looks at the literary output associated with coffee bars and their links to youth culture and the coffee bar scene. It focuses on the work of John Osborne and Colin Wilson, figureheads of the Angry Young Men literary grouping, and Colin MacInnes who operated adjacently. It traces the links between these writers and the coffee bar phenomenon, but it also explores their wider associations to youth culture in the 1950s through reflections of alienation and generational divide in their writing.

The final chapter moves onto a discussion of skiffle music, its emergence from revivalist (trad) jazz, and issues of Americanisation and amateurism that surrounded the music of the coffee bars. Skiffle was a do-it-yourself British interpretation of black American blues and folk music, that emerged in tandem with coffee bars. This chapter emphasises the importance of skiffle in the popularisation of coffee bars and the increasing role of music in the construction of youth identity.

It does so by drawing on the depictions of Soho coffee bars and their habitués in films *Expresso Bongo* and *Beat Girl* to understand the tropes and stereotypes created or perpetuated by these representations.

In researching and developing this dissertation, In researching and developing this dissertation, access to primary sources has of course been compromised by the coronavirus pandemic striking the country just as research began in earnest in March. Archival visits have been limited to one visit to the London Metropolitan Archives (LMA) and a visit to the New Left/Raphael Samuel Archive at the Bishopsgate Institute. The visit to the LMA visit was necessarily selective, yet it yielded some interesting insights through the planning documents and licensing applications that they held on file for a considerable number of Soho coffee bars. The Bishopsgate Institute offered useful sources on Partisan Coffee House and the ￼Universities and Left Review. These papers were donated to the Bishopsgate Institute by Raphael Samuel, and is made up mostly of his correspondence, bills, accounts and records alongside random scraps of paper covered with illegible handwriting. The wealth of material that the archive offered on the Partisan undoubtedly resulted in the Partisan chapter becoming a useful case study in this dissertation.

As a result of the lack of physical access to archives like the BBC, the BFI and the National Archives, increasing focus has been given to the representations of the coffee bar phenomenon. The Soho coffee bars feature heavily in *Expresso Bongo* (1959) and  *Beat Girl* (1960) these films have been probed for their depictions of coffee bars and how they reflected and shaped attitudes towards the coffee bars, popular music and youth culture. Comedian Tony Hancock appeared in a film representation, *The Rebel* (1961), and a radio episode ‘The Espresso Bar’ (1956) as part of the *Hancock’s Half Hour* series.

There are a number of valuable newsreel videos available from online sources that provide wonderful, if highly mediated, insight and access into the world of 1950s Soho. *Sunshine in Soho* (1956) is a short documentary film that provides a look into almost all the aspects of Soho life described in this dissertation: coffee-bars; cosmopolitanism; jazz, skiffle, rock and roll; politics; and bohemianism in Soho. Other relevant material includes *Soho Goes Gay* (1955) by British Pathé, an overview of the first Soho Fair. ‘Coffee Bar’ (1959), an episode of the *Look at Life* reel series by the Rank Organisation, provides an audio-visual journey through the spaces of the Soho coffee bars, from the Partisan to Le Macabre. Photographic material has been compiled from several online image libraries. This range of visual sources helps to provide a fuller picture of the coffee bars and how they were experienced.

Extensive use has been made of newspaper archives, and the *Guardian/Observer* and *The Times* andyielded the most material. These sources have been used to analyse responses to youth culture and coffee bars in the media and how this might have influenced wider public discourse. Newspapers have also been useful for understanding perceptions of Soho in mainstream society and the stereotypes, prejudices and falsehoods perpetuated by the media that shaped these perceptions.

Contemporary journals have also been extensively utilised in this dissertation as a primary source. The *Universities & Left Review* (*ULR*), and to a lesser extent *New Left Review,* have been rich resources for understanding the New Left’s response to problems of youth and culture in the late 1950s as well as for material on the Partisan Coffee House. All issues of the *ULR* areavailable online via the Barry Amiel & Norman Melburn Archive. Other journals such as *Encounter* and *New Statesman* have also been useful in providing contemporary accounts of the coffee bar. Design journals are another rich resource that provided imagery and descriptions; *Architectural Review* proved especially useful during my initial research.

From this diverse range of archival sources, the story of the coffee bars emerges as a product of the intersection of profound political, social and cultural changes in British society in the post-war period. Through analysis of its physical and cultural geography, Soho emerges as a receptive space for the coffee bars new forms of youth socialisation, consumption and cultural values.

# Chapter 1: The Soho Espressos: Origins and Development

‘Soho was alive with cellar coffee-bars, where skiffle and jazz could be played and heard informally and where the rich odour of marijuana became, for the first time, a familiar part of the London atmosphere. Sam Widges was the most popular. Also there was the Nucleus, the Gyre and Gimble, the Farm. They were open most of the night and often the management would leave you to sleep where you sat. It was a place to stay in the dry if you didn’t want to go home. It became obvious that parental control was going to stop at about the age of fifteen for a large number of young people.’[[39]](#footnote-40)

Jeff Nutall’s quote provides a sense of the youthful energy and vibrancy that surrounded the Soho coffee bar scene of the 1950s. The quote encapsulates the intersection of many different elements that make this subject so interesting - the centrality of Soho and the unique spatial qualities of its architecture intersect with a growing and increasingly independent culture of young people, and new musical expressions in the forms of skiffle and jazz. That the odour of marijuana smoke became part of London’s nightlife culture in these subcultural spaces speaks to the cosmopolitan ‘edge’ of Soho and the rebellious attitude of the area’s young habitués.

The emergence of the espresso bar boom in a specific place, Soho, and in a specific period, the 1950s, is the fundamental focus of this thesis. While the other chapters analyse the broader world of youth culture, particularly the political, literary and musical worlds associated with the espresso bar scene, this chapter takes the espresso bars themselves and studies their origins and character. The espresso bars were not monolithic, though they were often stereotyped and represented as so. This chapter will explore the diversity of the Soho espressos, their habitues and the cultural expressions that found a home in these newly emerging social spaces in the West End of London.

## The importance of espresso

The story of the coffee bars in 1950s London is essentially the story of espresso, or ‘expresso’ as it was often referred to in Britain. The invention of the espresso machine and its importation from Italy is a key part of the origin story of the coffee-bar phenomenon of the 1950s. It also marks a point of departure from the coffee-houses of earlier centuries, and the teahouses and milk bars that still proliferated across the country in the 1940s and 1950s. The espresso machine itself represented a mechanical manifestation of modernity – a combination of steam, shiny chrome, rows of levers and the speed with which coffee could be made added up to an experience which was thoroughly modern. The espresso coffee which it produced, and which is now ubiquitous across the globe, was itself highly extracted, highly caffeinated and highly exciting to a British audience. The cappuccino added yet another layer of attraction and continental exoticism to the attraction of the espresso.

The excitement that the espresso experience produced needs to be understood in relation to the economic, cultural and gastronomic context of postwar Britain. After the end of the Second World War, Britain went through a period of austerity and rationing that lasted well into the mid-1950s. The majority of foods being imported into the country were subject to rationing and price controls. Food in Britain was characterised as grey, dreary and drab, brought on by the continued rationing and food shortages that still afflicted the country.[[40]](#footnote-41) Coffee had been rationed across Europe shortly after the start of the War and resultantly the quality of coffee available to the public deteriorated badly. Numerous mixtures and approximations of coffee – most involving chicory and other roasted cereals - appeared during wartime and continued to enjoy widespread consumption. Nestlé’s *Ricory*, an instant coffee and chicory drink, was first introduced in 1952, indicative of the rise of instant and adulterated coffee products as postwar rationing continued.[[41]](#footnote-42)

The impact of austerity and rationing extended beyond issues of the food supply system and played a significant role in shaping the culture and mentality of people in the postwar period. Dominic Sandbrook argues that, ‘The truth was that the Britain in the fifties had not recovered from the rigours of war.’[[42]](#footnote-43) The years immediately after the war were marked by food, fuel and housing shortages; by 1948, ration allowances were significantly less than during wartime; around 500’000 houses had been destroyed; and the nation’s finances were in extremely poor health. The generation of people who lived through this period of scarcity developed a culture of thriftiness and sober moderation that stayed with them after food rationing was finally lifted in July 1954.[[43]](#footnote-44) As a younger generation of people came of age in the ‘affluent society’ of the mid-fifties, the careful moderation and make-do attitude of their parents and grandparents' generations made little sense in an era of increasing consumerism. It is within this context that the allure and excitement of the espresso machine can be understood – a mixture of theatre, modern styling and continental exoticism contrasted against the dreary, insular and somewhat depressed cultural atmosphere of Britain in the early 1950s.

A free market for coffee reappeared in 1952, but, due to acute problems with global supply in 1953 and 1954, the price of coffee reached record highs. The increased price of coffee, generally priced at double the cost of a cup of tea, moved it from the commodity bracket to the luxury.[[44]](#footnote-45) Some retailers discovered that they could charge even more in this luxury market and it was in this context that the first espresso machines were imported to London from Italy.

There are many claimants to the invention of the espresso machine and the exact inventor remains unclear. Patents were first filed for coffee-brewing machines that used espresso-like technology from 1884. Luigi Bezzera patented his steam-powered espresso machine in 1901 and sold the patent to Desidero Pavoni in 1903, who began making the first commercially available espresso machines. In 1906, at the Fiera di Milano, both Bezzera and Pavoni displayed their wares as *caffé espresso*. The technology allowed coffee to be brewed very quickly, hence espresso, but the viscosity of that coffee was more akin to filter coffee than today’s espresso and is said to have had a heavily burnt flavour.[[45]](#footnote-46) Speed was the key innovation of these espresso machines rather than beverage quality. The posters of Leonetto Cappiello for Victoria Arduino of Turin in 1922 connected the speed and steam of caffé espresso with the steam-powered express train, asserting a modern image of speed through steam.[[46]](#footnote-47)

In 1947, Achille Gaggia registered a patent for a new form of espresso technology that incorporated a lever-operated piston that included a large spring to produce pressures of over nine bars. It was the introduction of high pressure that created the type of espresso we know today: a small shot of highly extracted and viscous dark coffee topped with a signature brown foam or crema. Gaggia’s innovation inspired many others manufacturers, including Pavoni and La Marzocco, and the widespread introduction of modern espresso revolutionised the coffee industry in Italy and led to the emergence of a mass-Italian coffee culture in the transformative era of the Italian ‘economic miracle.’[[47]](#footnote-48) The steam generated by the machines, and the subsequent inclusion of steam wands, also allowed for the creation of foamy heated milk drinks and the emergence of the cappuccino as a feature of Italian coffee culture and in the spread of coffee bars in Britain.[[48]](#footnote-49)

In 1952, Pino Riservato, a travelling dental salesman from Milan, apparently appalled by the poor quality of coffee in Britain, spotted the potential in a growing market for coffee after the lifting of price controls, bought the sole agents rights to sell Gaggia products in the United Kingdom. In the summer of 1953, following a difficult import process and a lack of interest from the catering trade, Riservato established his own coffee bar, the Gaggia Experimental Coffee Bar, in the basement below his offices at 10 Dean Street in Soho. The choice of location is reflective of the strong Italian community in eastern Soho, where numerous delicatessens and restaurants had been established in the interwar period. Also known as the Moka-Ris and the Gaggia House, the espresso machine formed the focal point of the coffee bar and set a thoroughly modern tone for the design of coffee bars (see figure 1).[[49]](#footnote-50)



Figure 1. Moka-Ris Experimental Bar, Dean Street, Soho, photographer Nicholas Vergette.

Riservato’s influence appears large. He set a precedent in calling his business a ‘coffee bar’ as opposed to a café or a coffee house. Those terms had history and cultural associations in Britain, whereas coffee bar did not, so new meanings and identities could be projected upon it. Riservato also established an alliance with the Kenco Coffee Company, who named their market-dominating espresso blend Moka-Ris, and established Gaggia as the de-rigueur espresso machine in British coffee bars and cafés.[[50]](#footnote-51)

Riservato made his one of his early sales to a Scotsman, Maurice Ross, who opened the Moka Bar just yards away in Frith Street in 1953. The Moka Bar, designed by architect Geoffrey Crockett, again forwarded a clean modern aesthetic with Formica surfacing and placed the shiny Gaggia machine at the centre of the action (see figure 2). [[51]](#footnote-52) The clientele present in figure 2 also raises questions concerning the association with coffee bars as spaces of youth, as clearly there are older generations present. It is possible that at this early stage, teenage occupation of coffee bars had not yet taken hold and that this increasingly changed over the course of the decade. The success of the Moka Bar, as suggested by the packed crowd in figure 2, proved there was a ready-market for espresso and within two years the coffee-bar boom was well underway, radiating out from its core in Soho.



Figure 2. Customers and staff at the Moka Bar, Frith Street, London, 21 August 1954, photographer Kurt Hutton. Hulton Archive/Getty Images.

The origins of the coffee bars in Soho therefore owes a lot to the Italian influence in Soho. The first coffee bars, Moka-Ris and the Moka, were located in the heart of London’s Italian community in eastern Soho, and they were arguably catering mainly to the local Italian community. This influence was also evident in the culinary offering. While many coffee bars were associated with American foods like hamburgers and milkshakes, there was also a strong Italian presence on the menus of Soho coffee bars and cafés where ‘miles of spaghetti’ were ingested by British consumers. By the late fifties Italian food had found increasing popularity, indicated by the fact that British production of pasta was fifteen times the pre-war level.[[52]](#footnote-53)

However, this was also indicative of the growing interest in exotic and continental foods as the 1950s progressed. This phenomenon is perhaps best exemplified by the enormous popularity of Elizabeth David’s books of Mediterranean and French cooking, first published in the early 1950s that became a staple of middle-class kitchens by the end of the decade.[[53]](#footnote-54) Cosmopolitan Soho’s restaurants and delicatessens naturally offered a plethora of culinary options from French, Spanish, Greek Jewish and Chinese cuisines. David‘s book *Italian Food* (1954) even referenced specific Soho stores like Del Monico‘s where specific ingredients could be found.[[54]](#footnote-55) Soho in that period offered a diversity of flavours that nowhere else in Britain could equal.[[55]](#footnote-56) It is not surprising then that contemporary reports note how coffee bars offered everything from Danish open-sandwiches, to French omelets and ’cakes that would not be disdained by a Viennese.‘[[56]](#footnote-57) The coffee bars of Soho reflected the growing appetite for continental flavours and aesthetics, while at the same time mirrored the cosmopolitan character of Soho’s ’little continent’.

## Coffee bar design

The design of coffee bars has been the subject of stereotyping that emphasise their ‘amateur-exoticism’ and this has been reflected in the historiography. Bill Osgerby states that they were ‘often furnished in a pseudo-exotic style (with bullfight posters, bamboo fixtures, tropical plants an occasional shell or a Mexican mask).’[[57]](#footnote-58) Dominic Sandbrook also pigeonholes coffee bar design into a set of homogenous features:

‘the basic design of the typical coffee bar was simple enough: a pine bar, behind which steamed one of Gaggia’s clattering machines; a series of little plastic tables at which the customers sipped their little glasses of coffee; a dancing area, or an area for a singer in the evenings; and, of course, a juke box to play the new hit singles.’[[58]](#footnote-59)

Matthew Partington has challenged this stereotyping by focusing on the theme of amateurism and the diversity of design that amateurism fostered. Partington points out that most coffee bars were independently owned and often started by people with limited catering experience. He notes that this was made possible by the economic depression of the early 1950s and the availability of cheap commercial leases in central London[[59]](#footnote-60). Contemporary reports of early coffee bars emphasised amateurism as a key characteristic. For example, Martha Gellhorn writing in the left-leaning *Encounter* asserted that ‘anyone can make an Espresso bar. No previous experience or training is necessary...Amateurism in fact pays.’[[60]](#footnote-61) Architectural critic Stephen Gardiner, writing for the modernist journal *Architectural Journal,* noted that the best coffee bars were designed by amateurism, sometimes ’vulgar, flashy and fake’ but imbued with a sense of humour. Gardiner added that the fierce competition between coffee bars resulted in a ’dissimilarity of design within a general framework of bamboo, black ceilings, brick wallpapers...and so on’.[[61]](#footnote-62)

Le Macabre and Heaven & Hell were two coffee bars that exemplified this dissimilarity of design within a general framework - a gothic framework in their case. The horror-themed Le Macabre was painted black and furnished with coffin tables and skull ashtrays (see figure 3 below). Heaven & Hell offered stark contrast within one premises of a bright-white heaven upstairs and a pitch-black hell with flames and devils on the walls downstairs (see figure 4). Le Macabre features in both *Look at Life’s* ‘Coffee-bar’ (1959) newsreel and in British Pathé’s ‘It’s the age of the teenager’ (1958) as an extreme example of coffee bar decoration. The coffee bar is also clearly identified as a space occupied by youth in these newsreels signified by the young clientele, a jukebox and a skiffle band. Clearly both of these coffee bars were marketing themselves to a youth/teenage audience through their outlandish interior design. However, as Partington argues, it is also indicative of the increasing youth occupation, and identification with, coffee bars by the late 1950s.[[62]](#footnote-63)

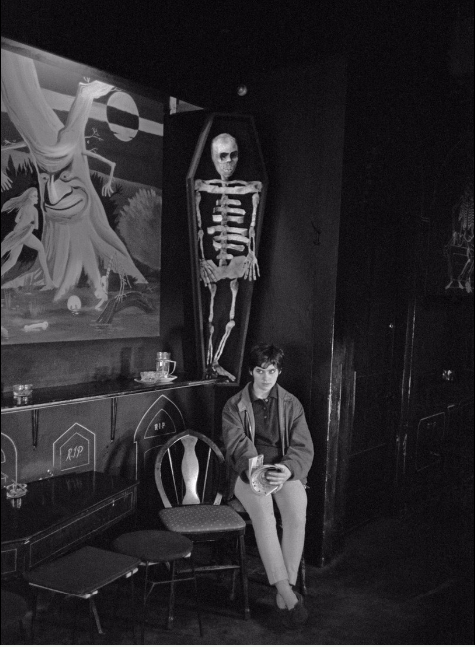


Figure 3. A young girl with make-up of the period, sits in the famous 'Macabre' coffee bar in Soho, London. 1957, photographer David Hurn. Artstor/Magnum Photos.



Figure 4. Heaven & Hell Advertisement. <https://ericlindsay.wordpress.com/heaven-and-hell-coffee-lounge-in-soho-w-i/> [accessed 5 July 2020].

## Soho: Space and Architecture

As discussed in the introduction, the work of Frank Mort and Judith Walkowitz has been highly influential in considering the spatial contributions of Soho to the coffee bar phenomenon. Both Mort and Walkowitz emphasise the importance of physical transformations in the West End in reshaping and redefining Soho’s material and mental boundaries. While Soho has no formal geography, its boundaries are roughly delineated by four major thoroughfares that were created or transformed in the nineteenth century: Oxford Street to the North, Charing Cross Road to the East, Coventry Street to the South and Regent Street to the West. Mort argues that these thoroughfares marked not only the physical peripheries of Soho but that they were also marked the ‘resumption of more mainstream and normalising transaction...mass entertainment, shopping or tourism’, [[63]](#footnote-64) Walkowitz also references Shaftesbury Avenue, a major site of mass entertainment in theatres, that cut through Soho’s space, albeit on a pre-existing roadway, and brought theatregoers into the area as opposed to its peripheries.[[64]](#footnote-65)

The building of Regent Street in the 1820s, had the effect of creating a six-story barrier of high-end retail premises on Soho’s western border, separating Soho from the more genteel residents of Mayfair. The building of Regent Street was also an act of imperial power, the sweeping vista south from Oxford Circus a response to Napoleon Bonaparte’s reconstruction of Paris and a key site for imperial parades. Not only was it a commercial and political project, it was also a piece of social engineering purposely designed to displace the slums around Swallow Street, resulting in the displacement of thousands of residents.[[65]](#footnote-66) Soho‘s warren of old Georgian streets, and their connotations of danger and foreignness, were materially and mentally separated from the upper-class districts by Regent Street.

The expansion of Oxford Street in the 1840s resulted in the clearances of the rookeries and slums of St. Giles, leaving thousands more displaced and seeking shelter. Oxford Street emerged as London’s most popular shopping street by the late 1800s and a major east-west traffic route. The opening of Central Line stations at Tottenham Court Road, Oxford Circus and Marble Arch in 1900, followed by the opening of Selfridges in 1909 further enhanced its popularity among female shoppers.[[66]](#footnote-67) Oxford Street by the 1950s was intensely crowded with shoppers and traffic; marketed to tourists as a ‘mecca of suburban housewives.’[[67]](#footnote-68) In contrast to Oxford Streets traffic and mass-consumerism, Soho’s narrow streets and alleys contained small independent shops and artisan workshops, and they privileged the act of walking, strolling and observing in the manner of Baudelaire‘s *flaneur.*[[68]](#footnote-69) Soho‘s old streets and human-scale marked it as a distinctly different space from the modernity and commercialism of the West End around it. These qualities help to explain why multiple generations of bohemian and subcultural groups identified with the space of Soho.

Charing Cross Road was built in the 1880s and defined Soho’s eastern boundary. Another major hub of traffic, it was also home to St Martin’s School of Art and many bookshops. The presence of Art students on Soho’s periphery suggests that they would have made up some of the coffee- bar clientele. It is perhaps a part of the reason why coffee bar habitués were often presented in the media as being of the ‘artistic avant-garde.'[[69]](#footnote-70) The building of Charing Cross Road in the east and Regent St in the West also had the effect of pushing the parishes of St Anne‘s (east) and St James (west) together into the square mile that defines Soho to this day.[[70]](#footnote-71)

Whereas Coventry Street on Soho’s south edge was defined by the grand theatres and clubs of Leicester Square. London’s premier centre for exotic entertainment and displays of the female form in the late nineteenth century, by the 1950s it was home to large cinemas and corporate headquarters. The grandeur and largesse of its buildings and entertainments stood in stark contrast to Soho’s modestly sized houses and workshops.[[71]](#footnote-72)

Soho’s built environment escaped the large-scale street improvements that transformed its peripheries. Soho maintained the Georgian character of its interior - the narrow streets, alleys and courts – and human scale that privileged the pedestrian.[[72]](#footnote-73) Mass entertainment, commercialisation and mass rapid transport transformed Soho’s peripheries, while the area’s interior remained relatively untouched by modernity. Through a lack of modernisation Soho remained one of the last remains of ‘Old London’ and this affirmed Soho’s exceptionality - to quote L.P. Hartley, ‘The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.’[[73]](#footnote-74)

The strategies of state and commerce reshaped Soho’s boundaries and their spatial practices, yet Soho’s relatively untouched seventeenth-century material fabric facilitated the tactical walker of de Certeau’s conception.[[74]](#footnote-75) Walkowitz evokes Virginia Woolf’s rambling routes through Soho, deviating off the shopping thoroughfares through the markets of Soho, taking new routes every time.[[75]](#footnote-76) This tactical resistance was also reflected in Soho’s legacy of bohemianism, its diverse communities and in its ties with the sex trade. The Soho coffee bars and the youth subcultures that operated around them represented a continuation of this resistance to top-down strategy that defined Soho’s material and mental space.

The mental space of Soho was heavily influenced by the continuity of its material character, but it was also shaped by the people who chronicled it. Arthur Ransome’s *Bohemia in London* (1907) placed Soho at the centre of London’s avant-garde artistic and literary life. Ransome’s account of Soho focused on its restaurants, cafés and pubs, and painted a decidedly English and quaint picture of Soho bohemianism. He harked back to tales of English writers William Hazlitt and Thomas de Quincey, omitted the hedonism of Oscar Wilde’s era and gave little mention to Soho’s foreignness and reputation for crime and vice. Ransome’s account forwarded Soho as London’s answer to Paris’ bohemian zones Quartier Latin and Montmartre.[[76]](#footnote-77) Daniel Farson’s account of Soho bohemianism in the 1950s, also stresses the extent to which Soho was a state of mind and does so by comparing it again to Paris’ Left Bank, but also to New York’s Greenwich Village and Weimar-era Berlin.[[77]](#footnote-78) Both Farson and Ransome contributed to the layered construction of Soho’s imagined space by linking it to bohemian zones of other places and past times.[[78]](#footnote-79)

The older character of Soho’s built environment also contributed one of the defining physical features of the coffee bars: the basements. As Jeff Nuttall’s quote states, ‘Soho was alive with cellar coffee bars’ and any exploration of the documentary record and press coverage confirms this.[[79]](#footnote-80) Most of the Soho coffee bars were either housed in basements or had a basement accessible from the ground floor. A run through a list of notable coffee bars confirms this: the Partisan Coffee House, the 2 I's, Heaven and Hell, le Macabre, Freight Train, the Nucleus, the Skiffle Cellar, the House of Sam Widges, the Cat’s Whisker. The basements often had larger floorspaces than the ground floors and so often served as the spaces in which live music and dancing occurred.

The planning and licensing records of these establishments reveal that basements were often used without licence for the playing of music or dancing. For example, the basement of the Nucleus Coffee Bar in Monmouth Street was found to be used for unlicensed public music and dancing, with music supplied by a juke box or a band on weekends, with average crowds of 40 people on weekends. A 1961 application for grant of a licence was rejected on grounds of safety.[[80]](#footnote-81) The Nucleus appears to have been operating for some years by this stage, highlighting a sense of amateurism that was a hallmark of coffee bar design was also present in the business operations.[[81]](#footnote-82) A number of other coffee bars had similar problems yet still seem to have kept operating anyway: Skiffle star Chas McDevitt opened his own coffee bar, the Freight Train in Berwick Street, was denied licence for music and dancing in 1958; while the Cat‘s Whisker on Kingly Street was also denied a licence.[[82]](#footnote-83) The reasons given for refusal are uniformly the same for all the coffee bars - the basements were unsafe. The subterranean basements not only created spaces for the practice of music and dancing, but they helped to subvert state and police interference by nature of their covertness.

## Spaces of Youth

Soho coffee bars and coffee bars in general at some point became inextricably linked to youth culture. The first coffee bars in Soho do not appear to have been spaces that were either marketed to or occupied by young people alone. It becomes apparent that towards the end of the decade Soho coffee bars were more clearly associated with youth. Coffee bar design, in the cases of Heaven & Hell and le Macabre, clearly moved in a direction that attempted to attract and cater to the youth market. The example of the Partisan Coffee House, which opened in 1958, reflected the New Left’s engagement with youth culture. *Absolute Beginners*, published in 1959, further reinforces the argument that by the end of the decade, coffee bars were youth spaces. The film representations of coffee bars, *Expresso Bongo* (1959)and *Beat Girl* (1959)released towards the end of the decade further strengthen this impression.

Both of these films also reflected the increasing identification of the coffee bars as spaces for playing or listening to music. Music increasingly became a key component in the construction of youth cultural identity and so the development of music centric coffee bars like the 2 I’s further strengthened the idea of coffee bars as a youth social space.

Economic realities were also an important factor in the adoption of the coffee bar by youth. In a 1956 issue of *Encounter,* Mark Abrams presented the youth consumer, defined as between 16 and 22, as a new economic force in British life thanks to their relative scarcity and full employment. He saw the increased spending power of youth matched by an increased importance given to leisure resulting in a flourishing youth consumer market.[[83]](#footnote-84) In the same issue of *Encounter* Martha Gellhorn observed that ‘The espresso bar is a whopping moneymaker, and its largest clientele is young people. Here in scenes of varying charm they can have company and warmth, from morning until midnight or later, at the minimum outlay of ninepence for a cup of foamy, milky coffee.’[[84]](#footnote-85) While Abrams had observed the new spending power of youth, the ability to linger in one space unrestricted by licensing conditions, at the cost of one cup of coffee is highlighted as being a major draw for young people. The changing economic realities of young people was matched by a commercial social space that allowed occupation for long periods at minimal expenditure.

## Conclusion

The coffee bar phenomenon emerged in Soho as a site of youth socialisation in the 1950s. It emerged as a result of Italian technological innovations, post-war economic developments and changing culinary tastes interacting with Soho’s urban landscape and architectural quirks, as well as its legacy as a foreign and bohemian zone of London. The coffee bar’s adoption by youth reflected their growing consumer power, the accessibility of coffee bars and through their facilitation of youth cultural practices.

# Chapter 2 - the Partisan Coffee House and the First New Left

A store front at day

Description automatically generated

Figure 5. Exterior of Partisan Coffee House. Photography Roger Mayne. Raphael Samuel Archive.

The Partisan Coffee House stood at 7 Carlisle Street in Soho from 1958 to 1963, just a few yards from Karl Marx’s former residence on Dean Street. No plaque marks the site of the Partisan; only an image of a coffee grinder, above the entrance to what is now high-end leased offices, supplies any hint of the property’s past life.[[85]](#footnote-86) The story of the Partisan is a unique one among the coffee bar boom of 1950s London; a socialist space that reimagined the coffee houses of centuries past, as centres of dissent and intellectual foment, in the centre of London’s own bohemian zone. The Partisan represents a manifestation of the aims and ideals that drove the early New Left, and its story is intrinsically tied to this movement that arose among the paradigm-shifting events of 1956: Soviet intervention in Hungary and the Anglo-French invasion of Suez. The growth, problems and changes in direction of the New Left all find parallels and reflections in the story of the Partisan Coffee House.

The Partisan was established as the New Left was gaining momentum an activist political movement, and the establishment of a coffee house provided this movement with a physical home. Problems of financial viability and commercial nous beset both the New Left journals and the coffee house, culminating in the merger of the two constituent journals and several reboots of the coffee house. Finally, the Partisan’s demise mirrored the end of the first New Left’s control of the journal and the New Left as an active political force. The Partisan was intimately tied to the cultural and political activism of the first New Left, and it found no place in the theoretical Marxist approach of the ‘second’ New Left led by Perry Anderson.

This chapter asserts that the Partisan Coffee House was undeniably a product of the economic and cultural context of the post-war period. As a space it engaged directly with issues of affluence, consumerism and alienation, but also with popular culture, visual arts, music, poetry and wider changes in British social and cultural life. What set it apart in the wider story of the coffee bars, is that it brought a political dimension informed by Cold-War developments, anti-colonialism and welfare-state Labourism. was also a space informed by longer term legacies of subversive political and cultural spaces in Soho, as well as reacting to the contemporary coffee bar developments in the area.

The ‘First’ New Left: *ULR* and the origins of the Partisan Coffee House

The First New Left was a movement composed of a broad spectrum of socialist perspectives but centred around two main groups and their respective journals: the younger metropolitan group surrounding the *Universities and Left Review (ULR);* and the northern, more provincial, older generation of *The New Reasoner.* The two journals were closely aligned, to such extent that they offered joint subscriptions and would subsequently merge to form the *New Left Review* in 1960.[[86]](#footnote-87) The Partisan Coffee House was a project belonging to the *ULR* group, spearheaded by Raphael Samuel. The *ULR* will be the primary focus of this chapter; however, the significant influence of the *New Reasoner* faction on the development of the New Left are also given due consideration.

The idea of opening a coffee house sprung from the mind of Raphael Samuel, an enigmatic young historian and one of the editors of the *ULR* along with three other fellow Oxford graduates: a Canadian, Charles Taylor, Gabriel Pearson, and Stuart Hall, a Jamaican Rhodes scholar and the eldest of the group aged 26.[[87]](#footnote-88) They were young men with vastly different backgrounds and political leanings: Raphael Samuel and Gabriel Pearson were both of Jewish heritage and members of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB); Charles ‘Chuck’ Taylor was a French-Canadian Rhodes scholar, described by Stuart Hall as a sort of ‘Catholic Marxist’; and Stuart Hall an emerging cultural theorist engaged in anti-racist and anti-colonial politics, shaped by his experience as a citizen of both colony and metropole[[88]](#footnote-89) The *ULR* was a young, modernist and metropolitan grouping which was reflected in the output of the journal which blended political analysis with cultural criticism throughout.

The *New Reasoner* faction, which included E.P. Thompson and John Saville, were of an older generation, most of whom had broken with the CPGB after 1956, and were embedded in the Popular Front and anti-Fascist politics of the 1930s. The New Reasoners were Yorkshire-based and rooted in the labour traditions of the North. They espoused a somewhat romantic political position called Socialist Humanism, heavily inspired by the work of William Morris. One apparent difference between the journals, is that the *ULR* provided much more room to articles on the Arts and cultural analysis than its politics heavy counterpart. Despite the generational and geographic differences, both groups shared a desire to occupy the same political space; a third position between Stalinism and Labourism.[[89]](#footnote-90)

Around the two journals developed the *ULR* Club network (later New Left Clubs), with branches in over 20 towns and cities throughout the country. The *ULR* London Club found great success very unexpectedly, the first meeting, featuring Isaac Deutscher on 5 April 1957, attracted a crowd of over 600 people to the Royal Hotel in Bloomsbury. Regular weekly meetings of the London Club would attract 300-400 people, while a meeting at St Pancras Town Hall, ‘Cry Europe’, addressing French aggression in Algeria drew a crowd of nearly 3000 people.[[90]](#footnote-91) During this period the London Schools Left Club was also founded, which by the autumn of 1958 had amassed 250 members.[[91]](#footnote-92)[[92]](#footnote-93) The idea of opening a coffee house was conceived in this period to give a permanent home to the expanding movement and generate funds for the journal which, despite a growing circulation, was not in a stable financial position.[[93]](#footnote-94)

Raphael Samuel (then known as Ralph) first proposed the idea of opening a coffee house in July 1957.[[94]](#footnote-95) The project was formally taken up by the Universities Development Group, a formal group set up to advance *ULR* projects, at a meeting at the House of Commons. Samuel headed the working group and set about the task of finding donors to fund an initial budget of £6500 in amounts of £50, £100 and £250.[[95]](#footnote-96) The range of contributors is impressive in its diversity. Samuel was able to call upon significant donations from former members of the business branch of the CPGB, largely made up of Jewish East-Enders, whose ‘moral universe lay in ruins around them’, following the revelations of the treatment of Jews in the Soviet Union.[[96]](#footnote-97) Other former CP members who contributed included Professor Hyman Levy and the novelist Doris Lessing. Eric Hobsbawm also donated funds although technically still a CP member. Other prominent figures from the literature and the art worlds also donated: Wolf Mankowitz, screenwriter and author of *Expresso Bongo;* novelist Naomi Mitchison; actor Michael Redgrave; and theatre critic for the *Observer* Ken Tynan. By January 1958, £4000 had been raised, and the premises at 7 Carlisle Street had been secured on a 9-year lease of £450 p.a.[[97]](#footnote-98)

The Partisan projected some of the dysfunction that would come to plague it from its inception. Samuel was, according to Eric Hobsbawm, ‘the absolute negation of administrative and executive efficiency’, yet it was his vision, energy and ‘seductive enthusiasm’ that pushed the project through against the wishes of the editorial board.[[98]](#footnote-99) Samuel’s original plan of opening by January 1958 seems naïve at best, belying a lack of business-nous and commercial concern that reflected his personality and dogged the Partisan’s entire existence. The initial phase of the project, the first-floor library and meeting room were completed in April 1958, designed by architect Max Neufeld.[[99]](#footnote-100) The coffee house, located on the ground floor and basement, was designed by modernist architects Douglas Stephen and was not completed after until further funds were raised.[[100]](#footnote-101)

The Partisan Coffee House opened its doors on Wednesday 22 October 1958 and garnered a great deal of publicity in its early existence. The *Observer* featured a piece on the Partisan’s opening that declared ‘Only ten days after its opening, the Partisan... is already acquiring a comfortable and exciting flavour of its own, both culinary and social.’[[101]](#footnote-102) The BBC sent its reporter Christopher Chataway down to the Partisan to interview Stuart Hall, Raphael Samuel and several habitués of varying political persuasions. The spectrum of political leanings evident in this clip highlights the plurality of the space, but also the realities of running a coffee bar in the centre of London.[[102]](#footnote-103) The Partisan also featured in the Rank Organisation’s *Look at Life* series episode on Soho coffee-bars, as a space where ‘university students and other assorted eggheads meet to put the world right, or more often, Left.’*[[103]](#footnote-104)* The Partisan even caught the attention of the editor of fashion magazine *Vogue,* who wrote to Samuel expressing an interest in writing a feature on the coffee house.[[104]](#footnote-105)

The Partisan was marketed to contributors and customers alike as an anti-expresso bar where young people could meet in comfort, free of the pressure to turn over tables and high tension imposed by the other Soho espresso bars. Situated in a prime West End location just off Soho Square, the Partisan was close to the University centre and in the middle of Soho’s booming espresso bar territory.[[105]](#footnote-106) In its first months, the Partisan was attracting 500-600 people a day, with a seating capacity of just 150. Given minimum operating profits taken from other rival coffee-bars of £50 per week and the crowds it was attracting, the Partisan had the potential to be viable commercial entity.[[106]](#footnote-107) However, the entire philosophy that underpinned the space - socialist, low-turnover, anti-espresso - was directly at odds with the requirements of a capitalist, commercial endeavour.

## Politics, Culture and Consumerism

The formation of the Partisan is unique amongst the story of the Soho coffee-bars because it represents a direct intervention in popular youth culture by radical left politics. The connection between culture and politics had long been a source of contention within left circles and so the first New Left’s embrace of youth culture signifies a break with the socialist orthodoxies of the time, whether Stalinism or Labourism. For some on the Left, the coffee-bar scene was a symptom of the alienation, apathy and Americanisation that had infected British society in the 1950s.[[107]](#footnote-108) Richard Hoggart, in his influential book, *The Uses of Literacy,* on mass media and the decline of working-class tradition, expressed his disdain for the youth culture of the 1950s:

‘Compared even with the pub around the corner, this is all a peculiarly thin and pallid form of dissipation, a sort of spiritual dry-rot amid the odour of boiled milk. Many of the customers – their clothes, their hair-styles, their facial expressions all indicate – are living to a large extent in a myth-world compounded of a few simple elements which they take to be those of American life.’[[108]](#footnote-109)

Paradoxically, Hoggart’s work would come to be one of two key texts, alongside Raymond Williams’ *Culture and Society* (1958), that came to shape the debate about the relationship between culture and politics for the first New Left.[[109]](#footnote-110) That Hoggart’s disdain for coffee-bars could be reconciled with a movement that wanted to establish its own is symptomatic of the broad-based and eclectic nature of the first New Left.

Hoggart and Williams analysed the changes in culture in contemporary society, particularly the effects of mass media and its erosive effects on working-class culture. Hoggart took a particularly dim view on the apathy and consumerism of the affluent society emerging in post-war Britain, denouncing its shallowness and individualism as harmful to working-class community and class-consciousness. Williams’ expressed similar concerns about the erosion of working-class communities and their political commitment from the impact of mass media. His conception of culture as ‘a whole way of life’ was highly influential on the New Left’s political philosophy and its advancement of a cultural agenda.[[110]](#footnote-111)

For the New Left, the cultural approaches of Hoggart and Williams enabled them to address the problems of the rapidly changing nature of British society in the late-1950s - affluence, consumerism, youth culture - in ways that the base-superstructure model of orthodox Marxism did not allow. This cultural approach allowed the New Left to broaden the scope of their political philosophy, Socialist Humanism, which put human and quality of life concerns at its core.[[111]](#footnote-112)

Stuart Hall’s essay ‘A Sense of Classlessness’ in *ULR* 5, explored the themes raised by Williams and Hoggart, particularly the effects of affluence, advertising and mass media on working class communities. Hall went further and explored how changes in patterns of consumption and the influence of ‘admass media’ had altered ideas and perceptions of class identity:

‘The break-up of a " whole way of life " into a series of life-styles, (so-called " lower-middle class " unfolding into " middle-middle class ", and so on, upwards) means that life is now a series of fragmented patterns for living for many working class people. One cannot organise militantly to keep up with the Joneses.’[[112]](#footnote-113)

Hall’s essay called for new methods of analysis to account for the disintegration of working-class communities in post-war Britain, and the traditional Left focus on class as the prime mover of change. The migration of people from inner-London to the new towns is one example given of the disappearance of communal values and increasing individualism, ‘What do you have a home for, if you don't stay in it ?’[[113]](#footnote-114) Hall was met criticism from both E.P. Thompson and Raphael Samuel in *ULR* 6, for a lack of historical perspective in his conception of the working classes, both men forwarding an understanding of class identity as constantly shifting and subject to manipulation.[[114]](#footnote-115) Such divergence of opinion is characteristic of the first New Left and indicative of the diverse perspectives associated with the movement. Regardless of their differences, the New Left, as a whole, advanced an ’expanded conception of the political’ that included cultural analysis and cultural politics at its core.[[115]](#footnote-116) The formation and operation of the Partisan Coffee House can be understood from this vantage, as a space where contemporary cultural and political issues were fundamentally interwoven and intertwined. The Partisan was a part of the New Left’s attempt to embrace socialism as a whole way of life in response to the rise of consumerism, the growth of youth culture and to the shifting political landscape of the Left after 1956.

## 1956: Paradigm of the First New Left

While there are several long-term currents that influenced the formation of the New Left, the events of 1956 are unquestionably fundamental in the movement’s birth and resultantly the formation of the Partisan. Political fractures shook Left politics across Europe in the turbulent wake of the crises of 1956. Khrushchev’s speech at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and then the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian uprising quickly followed by the Suez Crisis later that year were key triggers in the birth of the New Left.[[116]](#footnote-117) However, to chart the formative impact that these events had on the New Left, it is necessary to analyse the relationships that tie the first New Left to the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB).

The crises of 1956, starting with Khrushchev’s secret speech at the Twentieth Congress, caused a seismic rupture in the world of British Communism. Key figures in the early New Left were members of the Communist Party Historians’ Group, notably Edward and Dorothy Thompson, John Saville and the youngest member Raphael Samuel. Others closely associated with the New Left milieu, Eric Hobsbawm and Christopher Hill, were senior figures in the group. Within a year of Hungary all but Hobsbawm had deserted or been expelled from the party.[[117]](#footnote-118)

The CPGB was a party not used to factionalism or open criticism of the leadership coming from the membership. The polarisation of politics in the Cold war resulted in loyal adherence to the party line, and criticisms of Stalin and the Soviet Union up until that point were viewed through this prism. Raphael Samuel recalled how being a Communist in Britain at the time gave you a ‘complete social identity’ and that they lived in a private world of their own, patronising the same cafés and going on trips and rambles together; as the Cold War deepened, Communists became pariahs in British social life. Pariah status reinforced the two camp, ‘them and us’, division felt by people in and outside the Party.[[118]](#footnote-119)

*The Reasoner: A Journal of Discussion,* was founded by John Saville and Edward Thompson in July 1956. As the name suggests, it was intended to facilitate discussion on critical matters affecting the Party and the Communist movement; discussion that the party itself would not permit. The debut issue contained discussions on the current state of the CPBG, Democratic Centralism, official anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union as well as a longer article translated from *Nowa Kultura,* a journal from the Union of Polish Writers.[[119]](#footnote-120) The inclusion of the latter article signifies the interest in the cultural dynamics of socialism, an interest which would later come to define the *New Left* movement.

The Soviet intervention in Budapest was a paradigmatic moment in the formation of the New Left, and it happened in parallel with the Suez Crisis, the Anglo-French invasion of Egypt to regain control of the Suez Canal. The ‘twin crises’ were preceded by uprisings in Poland, where blood had been shed in the streets and squares of Poznan and Warsaw. As the situation in Hungary developed, E.P. Thompson wrote a piece on 1 November 1956,’Through the Smoke of Budapest’, condemning the CPGB’s response to Soviet actions:

‘We British Communists have a right and a duty to greet our comrades in these lands [Hungary and Poland] of reborn principle. Shame on our leaders for their silence! Greetings to the Polish people! Honour to the working people, and students, who shed their blood at Budapest! May they regain mastery over their own future and curb the mob passions unloosed by their ordeal! And may it prove that Communist need never fire on Communist again!'[[120]](#footnote-121)

The Soviet attack on Budapest on 4 November 1956 and the British Party leadership’s lack of condemnation, sparked the resignation of both Saville and Thompson, who urged others to follow their lead; 7000 other CPGB members did so.[[121]](#footnote-122) From this ruinous situation the *New Reasoner* emerged, making up one half of the two journals that would later merge to form the *New Left Review.*

The Suez Crisis was the other paradigmatic event for the first New Left. Along with the Soviet response in Hungary, Suez shaped the political philosophies of both the *New Reasoner* and *ULR* factions. The Anglo-French invasion of Egypt shattered the perception that the days of European imperialism were over. The Conservative government, led by Anthony Eden, led a ‘brutal aggression’ against the Egyptians that was met by large rallies and marches on Whitehall within 24 hours of its announcement, of which the protagonists of the New Left were naturally involved.[[122]](#footnote-123) Yet the events in Hungary undermined any credibility British Communist Party members could claim when talking about imperialism. In the editorial of the final issue of *The Reasoner*, Thompson and Saville make clear their beliefs that neither Britain nor the Soviet Union had changed their ways,

‘Even the urgency of the Egyptian crisis cannot disguise the fact that the events of Budapest represent a crucial turning point for our Party. The aggression of British imperialism is uglier and more cynical in degree than previous imperialist aggressions. But the crisis in world Communism is now different in kind.’[[123]](#footnote-124)

Eric Hobsbawm recalls in his memoirs, the feeling that Suez was for British communists almost a side issue, one which they were outraged by but all but eclipsed by the parallel crisis in their own party:

‘God knows 1956 was a dramatic year in British politics, but in the memory of those who were then communists, everything else has faded. Of course we mobilised against Anthony Eden’s lying government in the Suez crisis together with a for once totally united Labour and Liberal left. But Suez did not keep us from sleeping. Probably the simplest way of putting it is that, for more than a year, British communists lived on the edge of the political equivalent of a collective nervous breakdown.’[[124]](#footnote-125)

As Hobsbawm recounts, for Party members the Suez Crisis was overshadowed by the crisis in the communist movement. The importance of Suez as a paradigm defining event for the New Left, therefore lies much more with the Oxford contingent of students who would go on to form the *Universities and Left Review*. While Raphael Samuel straddled membership of both camps, for independent socialists like Stuart Hall, Suez defined the political space in which they would operate. The first New Left operated in a third space, between Stalinism on one hand and Western imperialism on the other. Suez came as a reminder that Western imperialism was still very much in existence, despite the processes of decolonisation that were underway throughout the old European powers.

## The Partisan Coffee House and the Soho Espressos

Where does the *Partisan* fit within the wider story of the espresso bar boom in 1950s London? It clearly positioned itself as being in opposition to the prevailing trends of the coffee bars, announcing itself as ‘London’s first anti-expresso bar’ in the pages of the *Universities and Left Review.*[[125]](#footnote-126) The Partisan, therefore, was conceived as a radical new space; a resolutely left-wing ‘post-espresso' coffee house that stood in contrast to the commercialism of the espresso bars that had sprang up in Soho in the five years prior.[[126]](#footnote-127)

Even its naming sets the Partisan Coffee House apart from the Soho espressos. For a start this was to be a coffee house, not a coffee-bar or espresso-bar. This choice seems to deliberately hark back to the seventeenth century coffee houses of London, regarded as centres of political dissent, famously suppressed by King Charles II in 1675.[[127]](#footnote-128) It also recalls the *Kaffeehauser* of fin-de-siècle Vienna, such as the Café Central, which became symbols of late nineteenth century modernity and key spaces of artistic and intellectual life in a period of rich creativity.[[128]](#footnote-129) Eric Hobsbawm recalled that Raphael Samuel dreamed of ‘the pre-1914 revolutionaries, who would sit in a café for hours, playing chess, discussing theoretical issues with each other, planning various kinds of operations.’[[129]](#footnote-130)

While the Partisan advertised itself as the first Left coffee house in the country, Raphael Samuel, writing in a letter to contributors in 1958, recognised a lineage of socialist spaces, in London and around the country, that stood as predecessors to the role that the Partisan would play. He wrote,

‘The ULR coffee house is an attempt to create a socialist centre for the generation of the nineteen fifties. It acknowledges its debt and its commitment to a long tradition from which it yet seeks to break. It is emphatically not another socialist club.’[[130]](#footnote-131)

It is clear here that Samuel had a different vision for what the Partisan would be. While he acknowledged the inspiration of Left spaces that had existed before, he wanted the Partisan was to be a modern space, breaking from the characteristics of the older Left spaces. Samuel then reflected on the Labour clubs that proliferated across the industrial areas of the country,

‘In the mining communities, in the small industrial towns, in the East End and the waterside boroughs of the metropolis, the Labour clubs were at the heart of the early Labour Movement......But the Club is essentially anti-Metropolitan.’[[131]](#footnote-132)

The anti-Metropolitan character of the Labour clubs was a significant point of difference between the Partisan and the Labour clubs. The Partisan was clearly metropolitan in character; it was located in the West End of London, the cultural centre of the post-imperial metropolis. Suggestions of anti-metropolitanism indicate that Samuel felt there was a culture of anti-intellectualism within the Labour club movement. In contrast, the Partisan was an intellectual enterprise; the leading figures behind its foundation were all Oxford graduates and the editors of a leading intellectual journal of the Left. The character of the Partisan was both metropolitan and intellectual; the Labour clubs provincial and parochial. This contrast could also be viewed from a class perspective – the *ULRers* having (mostly) middle class backgrounds, the Labour clubs firmly rooted in the working class.

Samuel then proceeded to list spaces of the Left in London from previous decades and the problems that beset them.[[132]](#footnote-133) He cites the old October Club in Wardour Street, which became ‘ridden with faction fighting’ over the course of the Twenties. The Trades Union Club in Great Newport Street ‘cultivated standards of dinginess, discomfort and distasteful dinners and dreary discussion’ until it collapsed in the late Forties. These institutions were clubs and not cafes or coffee houses, and the membership required for a club is something Samuel clearly wanted to avoid, as, ‘A club effectively insulated the Left from contact with people.’[[133]](#footnote-134)

Samuel also paid homage to the tradition of cafes and coffee houses that had served as houses for the Left in the preceding decades. He recalls the Etoile in Charlotte Street as a centre for US political refugees, while the Coffee Ann in Whitcomb Street acted as an organising centre for the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War. Over in Clerkenwell, the Garibaldi is cited as a meeting space for Italian Left radicals until rumours spread of undercover agents surveilling the café. The only contemporary example he references is the Skiffle Cellar in Soho, which had acted as a social hub for young Leftists since the mid-1950s.[[134]](#footnote-135) While he recognises the important role these cafés played, it is clear that Samuel had a different vision for the Partisan. It is also notable that all these spaces (bar the Garibaldi), clubs and cafes, are based in the West End, with most centring on Soho. The legacy of decades of Left meeting spaces in the Soho area, must have been influential in the decision to locate the Partisan in the same quarters. The Partisan represented a continuity of Left meeting places in the West End of London, but sought to break from the problems of exclusion, insularity and factionalism that had characterised them.

## Architecture and Design

The approach to the design of the *Partisan* clearly differentiates it from the other Soho espressos. The expressed desire to create an anti-expresso bar manifested itself clearly in the architectural and design decisions, resulting in the production of a unique space that bore few of the familiar hallmarks of the Soho espressos. Architectural historian Nick Beech views the Partisan as analogous to the ‘Social Condenser’, a concept forwarded by the Soviet Constructivist architects in the 1920s.[[135]](#footnote-136) Responding to the Bolsheviks’ revolutionary seizing of power in 1917 and the abolition of private property, the Constructivists proposed the Social Condenser as a new form of post-revolutionary architecture that could create the spatial conditions for new forms of human relations possible in a socialist society. The Social Condenser was originally envisioned as architecture that was socialist and collective; space where the individualism of capitalism, along with its class and gender divisions, could be overcome.[[136]](#footnote-137) The Constructivists were concerned with the transformation of everyday life, to which the Social Condenser was adjacent. The Partisan, in its conception, represents an attempt by the early New Left to transform everyday life through the construction of a radically differentiated space for young people.

The design planning was begun by Gordon Redfern, a young architect then working at Douglas Stephen and Partners, whom Raphael Samuel had approached in January 1958.[[137]](#footnote-138) Redfern was an associate of the *ULR* and a contributor to the journal with his piece ‘The Real Outrage’ on the problems of urban planning in post-war Britain.[[138]](#footnote-139) (This piece was subsequently attacked in 1959 by E.P. Thompson for its characterisation of a passive working class, laying bare the divergence of political perspectives that already existed within the early New Left.[[139]](#footnote-140)) Douglas Stephen were known as a small practice that worked on high end commercial and residential projects, and more importantly, at that time, they had architects such as Kenneth Frampton who were influenced by the aesthetic and social ideas posited by the Russian Constructivists in the late 1920s.[[140]](#footnote-141) While, Redfern’s proximity to the *ULR* group perhaps made Douglas Stephen an obvious choice, their appointment signalled the idealism of the project; the *Partisan* was a unique sociocultural experiment, a Social Condenser, for welfare-state-era London.

The design of the coffee house reflects the hopes Raphael Samuel had for the space, but also reflects some of the dysfunction and oversights of the first New Left. A key feature of the design is the double height arrangement that connected the ground floor with the basement. This reflects the desire for the space to function as a meeting hall, so that a speaker could stand on a platform on the stairway and still be seen by everyone on the ground floor and in the basement.[[141]](#footnote-142) With a ground floor capacity of 70, and room for a further 120 in the basement, the idea that a space of this size could prove a suitable venue for meetings or visiting speakers seems to wholly underestimate the growing following that the *ULR* and the Left Clubs were gaining.

When Samuel organised the first meeting of the London Left Club in 1957, at which Isaac Deutscher, biographer of Trotsky and Stalin, spoke, over 700 people turned up to the venue at Bloomsbury’s Royal Hotel, where seating for 60 had been laid out. While perhaps Deutscher was the main draw in that instance, the Left Club’s early weekly meetings regularly attendances of over 200 people and grew quickly to numbers of 300-400.[[142]](#footnote-143) The Partisan’s 190-person capacity should never have seemed a viable venue for even the weekly meetings, yet it was clearly communicated to the architect that this was to be part of the brief. Practicality does not appear, given these details, to have been of great concern to Raphael Samuel in particular. Stuart Hall recalled that when Deutscher spoke to a capacity crowd, as one of the Partisan’s first speakers, attendees downstairs could only see Deutscher’s bottom half and vice versa for those upstairs.[[143]](#footnote-144) The Partisan project was driven by Samuel’s enthusiasm, with consideration for practical and financial viability notably absent from his concerns.

The design then followed the principles that Raphael Samuel had laid out for it. This was to be an anti-espresso bar, where people were to be encouraged to linger, play chess, discuss and debate politics, culture and theory. A space where socialists could be made, following William Morris’ belief that Socialists were made and not born.[[144]](#footnote-145) This intent manifested itself in various ways. The employment of large comfortable chairs, notably Alvar Aalto‘s modernist design Chair 611, surrounding long communal tables encouraged discussion, intermingling and compounded the sense that this was a space to spend time, whether reading, playing chess or debating, and not hurried along to make room for the next customer. Figure 6 below shows the ground floor, comfy chairs and communal atmosphere fostered by the design.



Figure 6. Partisan Coffee House, 1958, photographer Roger Mayne. Mary Evans Picture Library.

There are obvious contradictions and conflicts within Samuel’s desire to recreate the character of the older coffee houses in a modernist space; conflicts which betray the ‘janus-faced’ character of the early New Left.[[145]](#footnote-146) Architectural critic Reyner Banham, writing shortly after the Partisan’s grand opening in 1958, highlighted the tension and contradiction inherent in the scheme’s conception and design:

‘Quite apart from the overt historicism of the proposition to recreate the character of the older coffee-houses and the mousy monasticism implicit in the proposition that one needs a special environment to Left in, the functional programme presented to the architects was congested with a profit-making coffee-bar doubling as a meeting-hall and art gallery, and aesthetically confused by the decision to replace Right romanticism (“We didn’t want it look like an espresso bar”) by the romanticism of the Left (“Something of a French *tabac*”).’[[146]](#footnote-147)

The dichotomy implicit in the desire for the character of the old in a space which is new, is indicative of wider contradictions in the New Left. A generational schism between Ancients and Moderns was how *ULRers* characterised contemporary politics, with opponents on the Right and Left considered ‘old-fashioned' or ‘out of date’. *ULRers* constructed their modernity in these generational terms, yet Samuel later recognised that the generational break was not as severe as they perceived it at the time and that they were often ‘recycling old ideas under new terminologies’.[[147]](#footnote-148) These contradictions seemingly manifested themselves, certainly in the eyes of Reyner Banham, in the design of the coffee house.

. Eric Hobsbawm, in his memoirs *Interesting Times,* remarked of the Partisan:

‘It was a scheme designed for disaster. The then current fashion among architects preferred austere interiors looking like station waiting rooms. These attracted the more demoralised bums and fringe hangers-on of Soho, who were neither welcomed in nor attracted by establishments with a more elaborate décor, especially at night, as well as the Metropolitan Police in search of drug-busts. The large expensive tables and square chunky seats were designed to encourage drafting thesis chapters and long debates on tactics, while minimising the space for, and the rate of consumption of, income-generating customers.’[[148]](#footnote-149)

Hobsbawm clearly held contempt for the modernist and minimalist style of architecture adopted by the architects for the Partisan. He associated the design and austere decoration with attracting the less desirable habitués of Soho to the Partisan, which in his view undermined the whole purpose of the project. He thought the large tables and the Alvar Aalto chairs would hinder the financial viability of the business; the furniture slowed the rate of consumption and the turnover of customers. The Partisan, in his view, succeeded in its aim to be an anti-expresso bar, but was bound to fail to last as a commercial entity.

Hobsbawm’s negative recollections of the Partisan and its design need to be considered in relation to his own involvement in the project. Hobsbawm’s attitude towards the entire project was dismissive and almost entirely negative. He wrote, ‘In some ways the brief episode of the Partisan Coffee House symbolises the combination of ideology, impracticality and sentimental hope of those early post-1956 ‘New Lefts’.’[[149]](#footnote-150) Hobsbawm allowed himself, against his better judgement, to be talked into sitting on a board of directors for the Partisan to help establish the coffee house’s credentials as a serious meeting place for the left. He then noted that Raphael Samuel took no notice of the board. Hobsbawm opined that it was ’incredible that this hare-brained project got beyond the initial pitch’ and that ’whoever backed the Partisan must have known that it was not a serious business proposition.’[[150]](#footnote-151) Furthermore, he states ’Only nostalgia and the need to maintain contact between the pre-and post 1956 generations of the left can explain why I found myself involved in this lunatic enterprise.’[[151]](#footnote-152) Hobsbawm’s memories of the Partisan as a space, appear to have been shaped by his involvement on the board of directors and his negative reading is not shared by others involved in the scheme.



Figure 7. Downstairs at the Partisan, 1958, photography Roger Mayne. Mary Evans Picture Library.

The design scheme is minimal and modernist reflecting the design leanings of the *ULR* group. It had a spartan feel but the photographic record portrays a space that was actively practiced for the purposes for which it was designed, and which look relatively contemporary by today’s standards. The minimalism of the design does not distract from the cultural practices, whether they be paintings, debate, chess, conversation, music, poetry. The design scheme appears appropriate for a socialist coffee house and bears little resemblance to the highly themed and gimmick-laden interiors of nearby Soho espressos such as Le Macabre or the Heaven & Hell. Ralph Samuel intended to create an anti-expresso bar and in this sense the design was a success, this was truly a unique design among the Soho coffee bars.



Figure 8. Ground Floor of the Partisan, 1958. photographer Roger Mayne. Mary Evans Picture Library.

The food at the Partisan was consciously designed as well. For starters, this was not a ‘menu’ but a ‘bill of fare’, French terminology being considered a ‘manifestation of snobbishness.’ The fare on offer mirrored the eclecticism of the New Left – a mixture of central European, East End Jewish and provincial British cuisines – and had a decidedly proletarian emphasis:

Farmhouse Soup . . . Old fashioned pea soup . . . Borscht . . . Irish peasant stew . . . Baked Yorkshire ham with sauce Cumberland . . . Liver dumplings . . . Boiled Surrey fowl with parsley sauce and Patna rice . . . Boiled Breconshire Mutton with caper sauce . . . Frankfurters or Vorscht with potato salad . . . Apple dumplings with hot lemon sauce . . . Whitechapel cheesecake and pastries . . . Vienna coffee . . . cafe filtre . . . Russian tea.[[152]](#footnote-153)

The Partisan, according to regular habitué Lydia Howard, was not somewhere one went to eat. The coffee was also poor quality, Stuart Hall recalled having to cross Dean St to get a good cappuccino.[[153]](#footnote-154) A Gaggia espresso machine was installed and espresso appeared on later menus despite the anti-expresso motif Ralph Samuel pushed. A Fabian (extra mild) milk coffee was also offered illustrating how politics pervaded every facet of the Partisan.

## Commitment and Cultural Politics

The question of commitment circulated throughout the discourse of the Left throughout the 1950s. Jean-Paul Sartre had wrote of the importance of being *engagé* in the 1940s*;* that both intellectuals and ordinary people must seek political engagement with the problems of their times in order to affect change.[[154]](#footnote-155) The idea of engagement was an important theme throughout Sartre‘s work, and one that he practiced through his writings on the Algerian Civil war for example.*[[155]](#footnote-156)* This was yet another cross-channel influence on the nascent New Left, but more significantly there is perhaps no question which captivated the early New Left, across the *ULR* and the *New Reasoner* factions, more than that of Commitment.

Issue 1 of the *ULR*, contains two articles with Commitment in the title: Lindsay Anderson’s ‘Commitment in cinema criticism’ and Peter de Francia’s ‘Commitment in art criticism’. Commitment was clearly a key concept within the *ULR* milieu from the very beginning. Lindsay Anderson’s essay on film criticism, expresses the importance of commitment with regards to culture and he evoked the work of the Angry Young Men to make his make point:

‘Our ideals—moral, social and poetic—must be defended, with intelligence as well as emotion; and also with intransigence. To look back (and around) in anger may be a necessary beginning: but as Jimmy Porter himself demands, "The voice that cries out doesn't have to be a weakling's, does it?"’[[156]](#footnote-157)

Commitment in Anderson’s conception is not aligned with political party membership but with moral commitment and moral seriousness. Peter de Francia’s article also highlighted the connection between commitment and seriousness, and again underlined the importance and seriousness of culture. De Francia’s essay also explicitly rejects the rigid Marxism of the Old Left and their relationship with Art and culture:

‘The role of the critic who is convinced that art is a supreme manifestation of life, inseparably bound up with social and philosophical beliefs, is a simple one. To maintain criticism in the role of Lukac's "skirmisher", with all that it entails. To support, guide and encourage those artists who are experimenting, not for their own sake but to discover ways and means of establishing methods of expression which can provide at least a basis of discussion. For the role of the artist is not that consolidation, a thesis beloved by mechanical Marxist critics.’[[157]](#footnote-158)

Criticism of the Old Left did not stop with criticism of Stalinism and the Communist Party, but was directed just as vociferously at the Labour Party. E.P. Thompson, also writing in the first issue of *ULR,* illustrated the disaffection felt by many in the early New Left with the bureaucratic workings of the Labour Party: ‘Too many intellectuals who join the Labour Party seem to get swallowed up in seas of expediency. They concern themselves not with what is potential but with what is in the short-term, politically practicable.’[[158]](#footnote-159) Thompson, recently resigned from the Communist Party, expresses his frustrations with the anti-intellectualism of life in the Party, ’in a period of such significance for socialist theory as this, they can no longer waste time and energy in the toils of a bureaucracy which demands everything from them, from stamp licking to Daily Worker selling, except honest intellectual work; which hedges ideas around with dogmatic anathemas, and inhibits their expression with disciplinary measures.’[[159]](#footnote-160) The significance of Thompson’s feelings for both sides of the Old Left is that they are indicative of a distrust with membership and involvement in practical party politics. The political commitment of the New Left was channelled in a different direction, one that prioritised intellectual and cultural criticism over party political alignment.

E.P. Thompson would go on to be a regular contributor to the *ULR,* demonstrating the synergy between the *New Reasoner* and the *ULR* that would later prompt the merger between the two journals. Thompson’s distance from the *ULR/*Partisanbase in London, allowed him to view criticism of the New Left’s approach to commitment, particularly with regards to its metropolitanism and preoccupation with culture:

‘The suspicion resolves itself into the jibe which I have taken as the title to this article. These ULR types (the jibe runs) are passionate advocates of commitment in the arts, but they evade commitment on the central issues of class power and political allegiance. They are angrier about ugly architecture than they are about the ugly poverty of old-age pensioners, angrier about the "materialism" of the Labour Movement than about the rapacity of financiers. They wear upon their sleeves a tender sensibility; but probe that tenderness, and one finds a complex of responses which the veteran recognises as "anti-working-class." They are more at ease discussing alienation than exploitation. If they mention Marx, it is the Marx of the 1844 MSS, not the Marx of Capital or the Eighteenth Brumaire; they are interested in the diagnostician but not in the revolutionary surgeon of the human condition. Like the anarchists of the 1880's, the fringe of the working class which fascinates them is the criminal lumpen-proletariat. They see the authentic expression of the younger generation in a squalid street fight in Notting Hill, but the thousands of young men and women who flock every night into the Technical Colleges at Batley, Stoke-on-Trent, or Darlington, do not come into the picture at all, except as exemplars of the ethos of Room at the Top. If this Partisan generation (the jibe continues) cannot be dismissed as neo-Fabians, this is only because Fabianism is too dowdy and too exacting in its practical demands.... They are too pure-at-heart to immerse themselves in political action which makes sustained demands upon tact or organisational stamina; but respond lyrically to individualist or sensational protests, no matter how ineffectual or divisive in conception. And so (to bring the commination service to a conclusion) the whole lot may be dismissed by the committed socialist as the last intellectual waifs and strays in the long romantic grouse against industrialism, striking in Soho the final futile attitudes of protest in the face of the inexorable approach of the nuclear age.’[[160]](#footnote-161)

Thompson’s distance from the metropolitan base allowed him to critique the discourse that was circulating among the wider Left. In this essay Thompson recognises the stereotypes and cliches, particularly the accusations of an anti-working class and London-centric perspective, that were circulating in wider Left discourse. The identification of ‘this Partisan generation’ as a sort of mocking smear, implies that there was a perceived lack of serious political commitment among the young habitues of the Partisan Coffee House. Thompson acknowledged that there were some truths in this discourse, yet he defended their non-alignment as the most likely way to affect social change in post-war Britain, given the bureaucracy of the Labour Party and Trade Unions on one hand and the moral bankruptcy of the Communist Party on the other. The Aldermaston marches are cited as one way in which the cultural and youthful agenda intersected with serious political commitment.[[161]](#footnote-162) The Aldermaston marches and the nuclear disarmament campaign are where the Partisan would arguably play its most significant role in the New Left’s political commitment.

One clear instance where the early New Left clearly put their political commitment into practice was through its central role in the organisation of the Aldermaston marches and the offices at the Partisan took on the role of central headquarters. The Aldermaston marches were the largest yearly events of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), the first one marched from Trafalgar Square to Aldermaston in Berkshire, where the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment was based, in the Easter of 1958.[[162]](#footnote-163) The New Left milieu were highly involved in the CND movement from its inception in February 1958 at Central Hall in Westminster. E. P. Thompson was highly vocal in his anti-nuclear politics, while other contributors to the *ULR* like the writer Doris Lessing, Art critic John Berger and the filmmaker/film-critic Lindsay Anderson were also notable supporters from the New Left. The march committee also included people like Jazz musician and Sohoite George Melly, screenwriter Wolf Mankowitz (who wrote quintessential coffee bar film *Expresso Bongo*) and John Osborne, author of *Look Back in Anger.*[[163]](#footnote-164) The breadth of people involved in organising the march is indicative of how the worlds of politics, art, music and literature coexisted and intermingled within the spatial environs of Soho and in the Partisan specifically.

Raphael Samuel wrote to investors in 1958 about the impact that the Partisan had made as the centre of Aldermaston organising. He recounted how the *Daily Telegraph* had covered the march, ‘mournfully booming their message of doom throughout the West End.’[[164]](#footnote-165) Samuel also noted how their march had led to Westminster Council banning the use of loudspeakers in a 3-mile radius from Charing Cross. [[165]](#footnote-166) Peter Sedgwick, who contributed an article to the ULR on the politics of ‘the bomb‘, recalled how at 7 Carlisle St ’the first floor began life as a publicity HQ for the first Aldermaston march‘.[[166]](#footnote-167) Jeff Nutall, who attended every Aldermaston march from 1959, also noted the important role that the Partisan played in organising the marches and the atmosphere he encountered in the space:

‘The social nucleus of these activities was increasingly the Partisan Coffee House. Set under the library and offices of the Universities and Left Review, it had a puritan atmosphere you could cut with a knife. Upstairs were ‘good’ food, coffee and paintings; downstairs brute furniture, folk sessions, trad jam sessions and political harangues. The notice board was perpetually covered with an array of subjects that became monotonous, the bomb, the hungry, the death sentence.’[[167]](#footnote-168)

The Partisan’s unique spatial qualities as interpreted by Nuttall, arguably made it the natural choice as an organising base for CND. The ‘puritan atmosphere’ of the downstairs space would have found a natural alignment with the moralising nature of an anti-nuclear movement. Nuttall’s description of the activities practiced in the basement space – folk and trad jam sessions, political harangues – highlight that important intersection of culture and politics that define the early New Left. This intersection was also recognised as an important feature of the Aldermaston marches, as Edward Thompson remarked in 1959, ‘Next year the banners of Trades Councils must move from Aldermaston to Trafalgar Square; but the skiffle groups and jeans-and-pony-tails must still be there.’[[168]](#footnote-169) The combination of skiffle, trad jazz and activist politics on the Aldermaston marches now appears as an extension of the spatial practices of the Partisan and one example of when the New Leftreally made a significant impact on the national political landscape.

Commitment to the arts was certainly taken seriously at the Partisan. The range of exhibitions talks and events on artistic and cultural matters is impressive and demonstrative of this seriousness. The first exhibition in the coffee house, entitled ‘Twelve Painters’, was a reaction to what was seen as the depoliticisation of painting. Mary Turner, one of the twelve painters exhibiting, communicated this sense of seriousness:

‘it seemed more urgent than ever that artists who had an intelligent interest in life as well as a serious concern for painting should have somewhere to hold exhibitions and place their work and views before a public. The Partisan offers this space and the U.L.R. magazine gives room to talk about it.’[[169]](#footnote-170)

The Partisan offered physical space that attempted to reconnect politics, culture and life, in a way that the journal offered an intellectual space. The London Schools Left Club met there fortnightly from 1958 and held talks from people including: composer Michael Tippett; art critic John Berger; filmmaker Karel Reisz; and broadcaster and writer Marghanita Laski. The Schools Club also staged a production of Brecht’s *The Ginger Jar* at the Partisan in early 1959.[[170]](#footnote-171) The Partisan and the London *ULR* Club supported the Free Cinema movement championed by Reisz and Lindsay Anderson, who as noted above, both contributed articles to the journal.

The basement and its alcoves also became a centre for the folk and skiffle scenes that had centres all around Soho. The basement hosted some of the recording of *Songs Against the Bomb* LP featuring stars of the folk scene Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger.[[171]](#footnote-172) The association to the folk scene has been viewed as a reflection of the *ULR* groups attraction to ideas of authenticity and traditional culture embodied in the work of MacColl and Seeger.[[172]](#footnote-173)

Engagement with the skiffle scene that had exploded in Soho in the mid-1950s is harder to trace. Berlin states that it was played there and there is an advert for a ULR Club skiffle social in *ULR* at the Ballads & Blues prior to the opening of the Partisan so it seems likely there was some skiffle played. The primary association musically was certainly with the folk scene.[[173]](#footnote-174)

The Partisan and the *ULR* group hosted talks from a wide range of political and cultural figures on an array of topics. A few notable examples include: Claude Bourdet, editor of *France-Observateur* and leading figure in the French Nouvelle Gauche, on Algeria and de Gaulle; Isaac Deutscher on the ‘Red Sixties’; Raymond Williams and Labour MP Richard Crossman on advertising; and Richard Hoggart and John Berger on the mass media.[[174]](#footnote-175) This short list of the people who spoke at the Partisan highlights the diversity of issues being addressed and just how the space of the Partisan allowed for an intermingling of politics and culture during the short period of its existence.

## Apathy and the Angry Young Men

Along with the idea of commitment, apathy is another theme that appears constantly throughout the work of the first New Left. The Partisan Coffee House can be viewed as an attempt to create space in which young people could be stirred out of this apathy and re-engaged with politics. Apathy and alienation were also central themes of the work of the group of writers who emerged in the mid-1950s known as the Angry Young Men. The work of the ‘Angries’ became favourite sources for cultural analysis on the pages of the *ULR*, where articles proliferated on the works of Colin MacInnes, Kingsley Amis and particularly John Osborne. This literary genre provided representations of working-class youth culture that were both angry and alienated; the young men of the *ULR* were themselves angry with the political and cultural conditions of post-war Britain – e.g. colonial policy, the lack of any moral leadership, and the erosion of the welfare state.[[175]](#footnote-176) The Angry Young Men provided the early New Left with fitting material for exploring the penetration of politics with the emerging culture of young people in the mid-1950s.

John Osborne’s play *Look Back in Anger* debuted in the West End in May 1956.[[176]](#footnote-177) The play and its protagonist Jimmy Porter would be a source of fascination and debate across the New Left. In the *New Reasoner,* E.P. Thompson saw Osborne’s writing as an expression of the ‘decade of the Great Apathy’; a function of the impotence and alienation felt by the post-war generation in the face of Cold war orthodoxies and the bureaucracy of the British Establishment.[[177]](#footnote-178) *Look Back in Anger* and Jimmy Porter were a constant presence in the pages of the *ULR,* either the focus of, or referenced by a diverse range of contributors including Stuart Hall, Linday Anderson and Graham Martin.[[178]](#footnote-179) Jimmy Porter‘s sense of apathy and alienation, which spoke to the politics of the New Left generation is best exemplified in his lament ’people of our generation aren't able to die for good causes any longer. We had all that done for us, in the 'thirties and 'forties, when we were still kids. There aren't any good, brave causes left.’[[179]](#footnote-180) For the early New Left, a lack of any brave causes, ensuing apathy and alienation, represented the feelings of young people in newly affluent, Welfare-state Britain.

The relationship between the New Left and Kingsley Amis was somewhat more complex. Amis’ novel *Lucky Jim* (1954), and its anti-hero Jim Dixon, carried similar themes of apathy, cynicism, bitterness and boredom with middle-class life in post-war Britain. Amis’ politics, however, were individualistic and rather uncommitted. Amis wrote a pamphlet for the Fabian Society, *Socialism and the Intellectuals* (1957), that expressed his distrust of the ‘professional espouser of causes, the do-gooder', and attacked the romanticism of the left-wing intellectual.[[180]](#footnote-181) E.P. Thompson responded to Amis’ pamphlet in *ULR* issue 1, and 5 essays and one ’notebook’ entry appeared in issue 2 directly responding to Amis’ polemic. Raphael Samuel pointed to the success of the Left Clubs, particularly the 600-strong attendance at the Isaac Deutscher talk, as an example of how intellectuals could re-engage with the wider labour movement.[[181]](#footnote-182)

Stuart Hall contributed several articles to the *ULR* that analysed the work of different writers against the political and cultural context of the time. In the final issue of the *ULR,* Hall contributed a review of Colin MacInnes’ *Absolute Beginners* and Mark Abrams’ market-research report *The Teenage Consumer*, alongside two other works that explored the Secondary Modern generation. Hall’s essay ‘Absolute Beginnings’, through these works explores the world of the modern teenager – gangs, Teddy Boys, Mods, fashions, violence, racial divisions and patterns of consumption. Hall holds MacInnes’ novel up as a ‘distinguished piece of social documentary’ which deliberately takes the reader on a ‘tour of modern attitudes’.[[182]](#footnote-183) Set amid the backdrop of the Notting Hill race riots of 1958, *Absolute Beginners* represented for Hall, a survey of the modern teenage world and its evolving character, such as the generational demise of the Teds or ideas on race and sexuality, as well as providing a source of hope for the moral and social potential of the teenage generation growing up in affluent society of the late 1950s.[[183]](#footnote-184) Hall’s engagement with MacInnes’ novel alongside Abrams’ report on teenage consumption, underlines the importance attributed to teenage culture and its socio-political reverberations by the early New Left.

## Demise of the Partisan and the early New Left

The Partisan was a complete commercial failure. It not only failed to deliver on its original aim of generating money for the *ULR,* it became a loss-making operation within a few months of opening. By May 1959 the financial situation was described as severe, weekly takings were down 30%, £1500 was owed to suppliers and contractors, and subscribers to the project were being urged not to press for payment. Many subscribers were angry and wrote to Samuel requesting repayment, including from his former fiancé Jean McCrindle and an enraged letter from Nick Faith, criticising Samuel’s flippant approach to business management.[[184]](#footnote-185)

The atmosphere and the physical environment of the coffee house appears to have degraded rapidly. Alec Horsley, a member of the board, remarked in February 1959 ‘The first thing I must report is the serious deterioration in the quality of the place. It was dirty, untidy and-looked more like the waiting room of a mainline station than an up-to-date coffee house.’[[185]](#footnote-186) The cafe was given a revamp in May 1959 by a ‘team of twenty four voluntary *ULR* commandos dubbed ’Operation Partisan‘. Efforts were made to remove the ‘'objectionable Soho ne'er-do-wells, who during the earlier part of the year gave the Partisan an undesirable atmosphere, are being moved out and you can again start to visit it with renewed pleasure.'[[186]](#footnote-187) The desire to create a space where people were encouraged to linger resulted in low turnover of tables and attracted some of the less desirable habitués of Soho. The dark alcoves in the basement, which projected a certain romanticism, became a haven for drug taking and nefariousness. A new manager, Mr Thorogood, was brought in to try and run a profitable business. [[187]](#footnote-188)

Despite these efforts, the Partisan was still losing money and ultimately a private benefactor Nick Faith bought out the Partisan and paid off its debts to contributors. The building was kept as a centre for the New Left, the offices upstairs for decades after, and the Partisan after yet more restarts finally closed in 1963.[[188]](#footnote-189)

The failure of the Partisan reflected changes in the New Left. The merger of the *ULR* and the *New Reasoner* in 1960 was meant to pool resources, bring the two traditions together and allow for co-ordination of the wider movement. Organisationally *NLR* in this guise was also chaotic. Stuart Hall reluctantly took on the role of editor, but there were misgivings on both sides regarding the direction of the journal, reflective of the generational, political (ex-CP/Culturalist) and geographical (London/Provincial) divides within the editorial board and the whole movement. Hall resigned the editorship, exhausted after overseeing 12 issues of *NLR,* constant criticism from E.P. Thompson,and years of constant touring for CND and the wider New Left movement*.*[[189]](#footnote-190)The final issue of his editorship in November 1961 highlighted a growing awareness that the New Left was in decline: attendance at clubs was significantly down; sales of the journal were down; infighting over the editorial direction; and an overall lack of finance and organisation.[[190]](#footnote-191) The openness and pluralism that was such a key feature of the New Left and allowed it to embrace different traditions and political alignments, resulted in a lack of structure and bureaucracy that was needed to sustain it. It is fair to say that the Partisan adopted a similar attitude of openness and a lacked sufficient structure to enable its survival.

The first New Left effectively ended with Perry Anderson's accession to editorship in 1962. The direction of the journal changed dramatically, increasingly influenced by continental Marxist theory, and less concerned with issues of culture that had been such a feature of the *ULR*. The new editorial team also ended the association with the Left Clubs and the wider New Left movement. The journal became a successful scholarly publication that continues to this day but is fundamentally an academic concern with no activist presence in contemporary politics.

CND was also losing momentum and had begun decline around the same period. Attendance at Aldermaston peaked in 1961 and the whole anti-nuclear movement began to lose momentum with the failure of the Labour Party to adopt unilateralism as policy and as events in Cuba unfolded in 1962. The schism with the Committee of 100 in 1960 also began to sap the unity and plurality of the anti-bomb movement, just as the splits and tensions in the New Left diminished its open and plural character.[[191]](#footnote-192)

Given the changes in status of both the *New Left Review,* the Left Clubsand the Partisan, it seems reasonable to draw parallels between the status of the journal, the movement and the coffee house. By the early 1960s the concerns of young people were not what they had been in 1956 or 1957. With the decline of CND, the early New Left had lost a cause that drew many young people to the movement. The merger of the two journals exposed the fault lines in the movement rather than encouraging the broad-based, non-aligned movement that they hoped it would foster. The Partisan’s demise had its own factors, but the decline of the New Left movement and the abandonment of activist politics at the journal meant that the space was shorn of its raison d’etre. The Partisan was in essence the New Left’s outreach centre in London’s centre of youth culture. It was founded in a spirit of openness, hoping to engage with and foster active political commitment in young people made apathetic by an atmosphere of affluence and Cold War politics. The New Left after 1962 moved away from such active, practical concerns and so the project of a socialist coffee house was no longer of relevance.

## Conclusion

The Partisan Coffee House stood at 7 Carlisle Street in Soho for only a few years, outlasted by many of Soho’s coffee bars of the same era. The formation and operation of the Partisan is undeniably shaped by the political, cultural and economic developments of the 1950s. The location of the coffee bar in Soho drew upon the area’s enduring legacy of cultural and political non-conformism, but it was also an attempt to engage with Soho’s vibrant youth culture of espresso bars, skiffle and trad jazz.

The first New Left attempted to operate in a third space of Left politics - between Stalinism and Labourism without the limitations of party structure and hierarchy. For a few years they engaged directly with young people through the Left Club network and through their facilitation of CND they acted as a hub for a mass-movement of non-aligned young people. The establishment of a socialist ‘anti-expresso’ coffee house can be seen as an attempt to create an alternative space for young people in the heart of the West End where they would not be hurried and could debate politics and culture at their leisure. The seeds of the Partisan’s demise were therefore in its own anti-expresso ideals, but these ideals were responding to the concerns of commercialism and alienation that ran through contemporary cultural discourse, from John Osborne to Richard Hoggart. The Partisan Coffee House was an attempt to create a space that would bridge the gap between the non-aligned radical politics that emerged in the wake of Hungary and Suez, and the emergent youth culture of coffee bars, jazz and skiffle in Soho in the 1950s. It was a product of its time and place.

# Chapter 3 - The Angry Young Men of Coffee Bars

If the emergence of coffee bars, skiffle and trad jazz, were products of the social and cultural mood of young, mainly working-class people, in post-war British society, this same mood also found expression in literary output, particularly, though not exclusively, through a grouping dubbed the ‘angry young men.’ Their links to the Soho coffee bars are both direct and indirect; their writing focused on the provincial rather than the metropolitan, yet their work is important in understanding the cultural context in which the Soho coffee bars existed.

The angry young men were a myth; an invention of publicity and the press. It was a label attached to a group of writers working contemporaneously who shared some thematic and aesthetic concerns but was not a movement of actual association. As Robert Hewison asserts, ‘some of them were not very angry, some were not even young.’[[192]](#footnote-193) They were not even all men, although Shelagh Delaney stands as the lone exception. A construction of publicity they may have been, however they do represent an important cultural phenomenon that reflected the growing importance of advertising and mass media in shaping cultural discourse.

Reflecting their construction by the media, the list of writers generally associated with the angry movement is somewhat fluid. Those most closely associated include John Osborne, Kingsley Amis, Colin Wilson, John Waine, John Braine Shelagh Delaney and Alan Sillitoe. What these writers shared were their portrayals of alienated and angry working-class young people, who were in opposition to the ‘Establishment’ and the rigidity of the British class system. They generally presented a nostalgic view of working-class communities that glorified the struggles and poverty of past decades, while being highly critical of contemporary society and its convention.[[193]](#footnote-194) Their focus on working-class life shared much in common with the sociocultural criticism of Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams. Both writers lamented the decline of working-class communities and viewed modern mass culture as fundamentally alienating. These shared concerns arguably reflected the transformations occurring in postwar British society, such as the material destruction of working-class neighbourhoods and the patterns of social life that they fostered.[[194]](#footnote-195)

Arthur Marwick argues that the angry young men were in fact highly derivative of contemporary movements such as the American Beat movement of Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs, and the French existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre.[[195]](#footnote-196) Dominic Sandbrook, however, regards the Angry movement as part of a reassertion of ‘British common sense’ in reaction to increasing American influence and Continental (French) intellectualism.[[196]](#footnote-197) Such views reflect the ambiguity of the movement and the differences of the writers. For example, John Osborne and Colin Wilson were very different characters whose work held little more than a sense of anger in common. Sandbrook’s portrayal of the movement seems to recall Osborne most notably, whereas Wilson fits Marwick’s description more accurately.

The poster boy of the angry young men was inarguably playwright John Osborne. His play *Look Back in Anger* (1956) is probably the most famous work of the Angry canon and its anti-hero protagonist Jimmy Porter represented the archetypal angry young man: educated, working class, alienated, bitter, dissatisfied, angry.[[197]](#footnote-198) The play, in Osborne’s words, dealt with ‘the problems and aspirations of his own generation’ and it is a powerful example of a piece of work entirely indebted to the postwar context in which it was produced.[[198]](#footnote-199) The play was lauded by the *Observer* theatre critic Kenneth Tynan who determined that ‘Look Back in Anger presents postwar youth as it really is, with special emphasis on the non-U intelligentsia who live in bedsitters and divide the Sunday papers into two groups, 'posh' and 'wet'.’[[199]](#footnote-200) The *New Statesman’s* theatre reviewer also thought that Osborne’s play voiced the fears and frustrations of young people: ‘If you are young, it will speak for you. If you are young, it will tell you what the young are feeling.’[[200]](#footnote-201) Whether it was representative of postwar youth, or youth subculture, is difficult to gauge, however the theatre critics of two left-leaning publications certainly advanced this perspective.

The same review also unveils the cultural associations that linked the disaffected young men like Jimmy Porter to the coffee bars, ‘His is genuinely the modern accent – one can hear it no doubt in every other espresso bar, witty, relentless, pitiless and utterly without belief.’[[201]](#footnote-202) *Look Back in Anger* also associated itself directly with the trad jazz scene; trad jazz provided the incidental music while Jimmy Porter, a one-time aspiring trumpeter goes off-stage to practice the trumpet. For Eric Hobsbawm, trad jazz ‘captured the art students, the young actors the young writers, especially those who discerned in it the latent but undefined revolt which they themselves felt’ and ‘it was no accident’ that Osborne drew upon it.[[202]](#footnote-203) Dave Gelly further asserts that the trad jazz scene was both angry and young, and so Osborne had hit the ’nail on the head’ with Jimmy Porter.[[203]](#footnote-204) It appears that trad jazz, coffee bars and Osborne’s writing shared the same audience of educated yet disaffected young people.

The associations between the coffee bars and the angry young men is even more direct in the case of Colin Wilson. Dubbed the ‘coffee-bar philosopher’ by the press, Wilson even appeared on the cover of the coffee bar periodical *Intimate Review* in 1956.[[204]](#footnote-205) Wilson’s first book *The Outsider* was published just weeks after *Look Back in Anger* debuted on the stage in May 1956 and it caught the literary zeitgeist, reflected in positive reviews and strong sales. Dominic Sandbrook attributes its success to timing: ‘it exploited a limited interest in French existentialism and American bohemian writing, which were then fashionable in the more high-brow coffee bars of Soho.’[[205]](#footnote-206) It seems likely that it benefitted more from the critical reception of Osborne‘s work than those niche interests, reflecting Sandbrook‘s generalising opinions on Soho coffee bar culture. *The Outsider,* a work of ’quasi-mystical’ existential philosophy, mirrored the alienated intellectual of Osborne’s protagonist Jimmy Porter as it quoted and misquoted from the likes of Sartre, Camus and Nietzsche.[[206]](#footnote-207) The Outsider appears to have found an audience of individualist young men who identified with the alienated intellectual in certain coffee bars like the Nucleus, where skiffle and jazz playing intelligentsia frequented.[[207]](#footnote-208) Wilson’s success was short-lived, but his brief moment in the spotlight did much to connect the Soho coffee bars to the Angry Young Men, and spoke to wider concerns of alienation and generational divide that permeated cultural and political discourse in the late 1950s.

Colin MacInnes, author of *Absolute Beginners* (1959), was not considered one of the angry young men. Barry Miles considers his writing a precursor to the counter-culture of the sixties given his focus on rock ‘n’ roll, youth culture and West Indian immigrant experience in London.[[208]](#footnote-209) His work demands inclusion in this study because he shared thematic and aesthetic concerns with Osborne et al, it was published concurrently and can be considered adjacent to that literary phenomenon.

MacInnes was a habitué of Soho’s bohemian hangouts in his mid-forties when *Absolute Beginnings* was published. The book is narrated by a teenage photographer and follows his journeys through Notting Hill and Soho amid the backdrop of the race riots of 1958. With this backdrop it explores the world of inner-city London youth culture in the late 1950s -teds, mods, racial violence, coffee bars, jazz, skiffle and consumer culture - through the conversations and encounters of its narrator.[[209]](#footnote-210)

Frank Mort argues that it was MacInnes, through this book, who did the most to link Soho’s new youth cultures to wider audiences. ‘And everywhere you go the narrow coffee bars and darkened cellars with the kids packed tight’ is how MacInnes describes Soho.[[210]](#footnote-211) The narrow coffee bars representing one component of the ‘un-silent teenage revolution’ whose presence was writ large over Soho.

Mort also points out that MacInnes’ assertions on the strength of the teenage consumer spending was reflective of a wider concern with the issue as reflected in the work of Mark Abrams *Teenage Consumer* and Richard Hoggart’s work on the negative impact of youth consumerism.[[211]](#footnote-212) MacInnes also portrayed a ‘sense of classlessness’ that existed in the youth subcultures of London, that generationality had superseded social class in the minds of young people:

‘Not a soul cares what your class is, or what your race is, or what your income, or if you’re a boy, or girl, or bent, or versatile, or what you are – so long as you dig the scene.’[[212]](#footnote-213)

MacInnes concerns were also picked up by Stuart Hall who contributed two articles to the *ULR* that analysed the transformations of British society being brought on by postwar prosperity, consumerism and the agency of youth as a vehicle for social and political change (this is further addressed in chapter 2).[[213]](#footnote-214)

Historians have mixed views on MacInnes representations of youth subculture. Many scholars including Frank Mort, Bill Osgerby, Arthur Marwick and Alan Sinfield point to Macinnes’ work as a key text for understanding youth culture in the late fifties.[[214]](#footnote-215) Critics of this approach include Dominic Sandbrook, who finds *Absolute Beginners* implausible, unconvincing and a ‘relatively feeble pastiche of *Catcher in the Rye.’*[[215]](#footnote-216) David Fowler states that MacInnes’ teenagers deserve attention but asserts that MacInnes undertook no archival research and that the characters were fantasy teenagers.[[216]](#footnote-217) The authenticity of his representations of youth culture of course have to be treated carefully, but clearly contemporary cultural critics like Stuart Hall believed that MacInnes’ work aligned with his own understandings of youth as a cultural force and the changing conditions of British society in the era of the welfare state and affluent society.[[217]](#footnote-218)

## Conclusion

The work of these writers is representative of the broader cultural and political atmosphere among young people in Britain in the mid to late 1950s. It is a mood that was present in teenage occupation of coffee bars, in the popularity of skiffle and trad jazz, and in the politics of the New Left and the CND movement. It was an atmosphere of ill-defined opposition to the establishment and adults – one that saw the potential in youth as a vehicle for change. It was an atmosphere uniquely created in response to the cultural, economic and spatial changes occurring in British society in the postwar period. These cultural and political movements emerged as part of a response to the creation of the welfare state, increased affluence, teenage consumerism, Americanisation and the mass reconstruction of working-class neighbourhoods throughout the 1950s.[[218]](#footnote-219)

These writers were linked to the coffee bars through their writings and through their characterisation by newspaper columnists like Kenneth Tynan. The angry young man became synonymous with alienated intellectual young men who frequented coffee bars like the Nucleus or the Partisan. This sense of alienation runs through the story of youth culture in the 1950s and it is particularly evident in the story of the Partisan Coffee House and the New Left’s attempt to engage young people in politics through cultural means, reflected in their engagement with the work of Osborne and MacInnes.

# Chapter 4 - Coffee Bar Skiffle

‘The story of skiffle is the story of London in the 1950s and the experiments of jazz musicians like Ken Colyer, Chris Barber and Lonnie Donegan. It’s also the story of the coffee bar scene and the ad hoc groups such as The Vipers that blossomed there.’[[219]](#footnote-220)

The above quote by music journalist Tony Bacon, highlights the central role played by skiffle in the story of the Soho coffee bar phenomenon of the 1950s. Indeed, it could reasonably be argued that without this ad hoc movement of young musicians, the coffee bars of the 1950s may never have spread so wide as it did. Yet skiffle is not widely known or talked about in cultural discourse today, whilst the musical movement/genre lasted only a few short years before being subsumed into rock ‘n’ roll as the 1950s turned into the 1960s. Skiffle’s importance lies in its contributions to shaping the musical landscape of the 1960s, the Beatles started out as skiffle group ‘The Quarrymen’, and its amateur do-it-yourself ethos that would most clearly be reflected in the Punk scene of the 1970s.[[220]](#footnote-221) This chapter is not intended to be a thorough history of skiffle, it is an attempt to highlight the close relationship between coffee bars and skiffle music, yet it recognises the complexities and ambiguities of defining both the genre and the exact nature of this relationship.

What is skiffle and where did it come from? The etymology of the word apparently lies with a form of social or ‘house-rent party’ that would be thrown by urban blacks, particularly in the Chicago area, in the prohibition-era to raise money, usually with homemade and make-do instrumentation. A record appeared in 1929 called ‘Hometown Skiffle’ on Paramount Records based on the concept of a skiffle, which featured ragtime/piano type blues.[[221]](#footnote-222) Eric Hobsbawm, writing under his jazz-critic pseudonym Francis Newton in 1959, described it thus ‘a term dug up from the obscurer recesses of American jazz history, and virtually without meaning for anyone in the U.S.A.’[[222]](#footnote-223) It would seem likely then that almost no one in early 1950s Britain would have been familiar with the American skiffle of the 1920s, yet its influence would come to be seen clearly in the ad-hoc homemade instruments that would proliferate the British skiffle scene such as the washboard and the tea chest and broom handle tub bass.

The skiffle of the Soho coffee bars is a difficult genre to pin down into exact sounds or style guidelines. There is a level of ambiguity and complexity around the music because it is closely tied with revivalist dixieland jazz (known as trad jazz), folk and rock ‘n’ roll. The music itself was essentially amateur British interpretations of American folk blues and country-blues, that borrowed most heavily from Leadbelly’s repertoire but also from folk singers like Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger and Josh White.[[223]](#footnote-224) Despite the folk and blues heavy influence skiffle is considered to have been an offshoot of jazz. Hobsbawm, in 1959, considered it ‘a modification of revivalist jazz’ and a ‘leftist offshoot of the revival’ highlighting where he considered its roots and the political alignments of its practitioners and fanbase.[[224]](#footnote-225) This is indicative of the interwoven character of these musical movements and the impossibility of tidy categorisation of these musical genres. The story of skiffle is one of coalescing influences and interpenetrating spheres.

Skiffle’s origins in Britain lay within trad jazz, a style that had found a growing audience in Britain around the immediate postwar years, that looked back to the New Orleans jazz of the 1920s played by the likes of Sidney Bechet and Jelly Roll Morton. It was from within trad jazz in the early 1950s that skiffle would emerge as a musical phenomenon in Britain. Trad jazz had thrived in Soho’s basement clubs like Cy Laurie’s and the Marquee from the late 1940s, finding a home in Soho’s bohemian and subterranean landscape as the coffee bars would later do. Trad jazz developed an audience of grammar school and art school students, attracted to the genre’s connotations of authenticity and sense of revolt rooted in the experience of black Americans.[[225]](#footnote-226) Trad jazz was strongly associated with left-wing politics, and key practitioners of the music like Ken Colyer and Chris Barber identified strongly with their working-class origins. Hilary Moore has argued that this sense of revolt and struggle, is part of a wider cultural and political reaction to the physical transformations of British towns and cities - reconstruction of inner-city neighbourhoods, suburbanisation, new towns - that is also evident in the work of the Angry Young Men and arguably in the political-cultural project of the New Left.[[226]](#footnote-227) The prominence of trad jazz on the CND marches to Aldermaston speaks to this concept of a shared feeling among young people.[[227]](#footnote-228)

Colyer and Barber, along with Alexis Korner, Lonnie Donegan and a rotating cast of others, played together as Ken Colyer’s Jazzmen. It was during interludes in their formal business of playing trad jazz that the skiffle group first played, probably in 1953.[[228]](#footnote-229) However, it was Donegan who brought skiffle to the mainstream with his hit version of Leadbelly’s ‘Rock Island Line’, which reached the Top Ten singles chart in 1956.[[229]](#footnote-230) By 1957 skiffle was on television with the launch of *Six-Five Special,* specifically aimed at teenagers, and skiffle was now firmly a part of the national consciousness, reflected through caricatured representations in *Punch* and *Hancock‘s Half Hour.*[[230]](#footnote-231) The rise of skiffle goes hand in hand with the coffee bar boom which also began in 1953 with the Moka-Ris. The coffee bar provided the perfect teenage space in which skiffle could thrive. Their initial concentration in Soho, with its subterranean basements and an established trad jazz scene, also appears to have been a contributing factor in the positive relationship between coffee bar and skiffle.

What seems apparent from viewing contemporary media coverage of skiffle is that it was viewed as a passing fad and amateurish craze by many but also as a valid form of youthful musical expression. Eric Hobsbawm, writing in his New Statesman column on jazz in 1958, characterised the response thus, ‘Its decline has been watched with ill-concealed but mistaken pleasure by most professional musicians equally torn between contempt for the astonishing ineptitude of most skifflers and jealousy of the temporary commercial success.’[[231]](#footnote-232) Hobsbawm also recognises that skiffle was ‘the most widespread and spontaneous movement for amateur music-making within living memory.’[[232]](#footnote-233) Amateurism and ineptitude may well have been hallmarks of skiffle, but the uptake and empowerment of young people offered by the do-it-yourself ‘folksong with a jazzbeat’ clearly meant that this was a movement of significance in Hobsbawm’s view.

What is also of note in Hobsbawm’s article is that by the time of writing (December 1958), he considers skiffle dead; killed by ‘over-stimulation and over-exploitation' and what remained had begun to shed its amateurism and merge with British folksong.[[233]](#footnote-234) One of skiffle’s biggest stars Chas McDevitt was fighting off suggestions that skiffle was dead in 1958, yet resignedly admitted ‘we’ve had a good run’. Having just bought his own Soho coffee bar ‘The Freight Train’ he put more emphasis on his jukebox than live bands.[[234]](#footnote-235) If skiffle really was dead as a movement and commercial force by the end of 1958, its span at the height of the charts was short-lived, for in an article in the same publication just one year earlier, Hobsbawm was asking ‘Why has skiffle become so popular?’[[235]](#footnote-236)

Popular it certainly was. Participation levels are difficult to gauge accurately but press coverage suggests that it certainly was. An article from *The Times* in 1957, stated that there are ‘at least 500 of these groups in England, not a few of which have even achieved professional success.’[[236]](#footnote-237) It also posits that thousands of young people, men and women, ’hitherto musically illiterate’ started to play instruments and sing, however badly, with great ’gusto and delight.’[[237]](#footnote-238) Participation was one of the defining features of skiffle; the low bar for entry and the homemade instruments allowed thousands of young men and women to actively participate in the performance and creation of music. The participation of women is an important aspect raised here, and the presence of female skiffle stars such as Miss Nancy Whiskey, confirm that they were a recognised if small part of the scene. It suggests that the participation of women in skiffle challenged the accepted gender roles of women in the 1950s and renders them active participants and not entirely peripheral. The article also highlights the extent to which skiffle was culturally linked to the spaces of the coffee bars and particularly their cellars: ‘skiffle groups appeared in England, in the somewhat more sophisticated décor of the cellars of the coffee bars that erupted in their hundreds in London and the provinces.’[[238]](#footnote-239) The associations between coffee bars and skiffle therefore implies that coffee bars, certainly those where skiffle was played, were active spaces of participation and performance. They were not simply spaces of passive consumption in the way that that Richard Hoggart had portrayed them.[[239]](#footnote-240)



Figure 9. 2 I's Coffee Bar, 1958., photographer unknown. Pictorial Press.

## The 2 I's

The 2 I’s coffee bar on Soho’s Old Compton Street was likely the most famous of the 1950s coffee bars due to its associations with skiffle and the developmental of early British rock ‘n’ roll. Opened by two Australian wrestlers in 1956, at roughly the same time as the Heaven & Hell next door, the 2 I's turned to live music to save their ailing business after an impromptu gig by the Vipers Skiffle Group during the Soho Fair of 1956. This tiny basement, roughly 16’ x 25’, with a capacity of 80 people crammed in, became the place to see skiffle and early British rock ‘n’ roll acts.[[240]](#footnote-241) The BBC even filmed a live episode of *Six-Five Special* in the 2 I’s in November 1957 that featured Wee Willie Harris, the Chas McDevitt Skiffle Group and Terry Dene amongst others.[[241]](#footnote-242)

The 2 I’s became a haunt for Tin Pan Alley agents like John Kennedy and Larry Parnes to find new stars. Tommy Steele was allegedly found by Kennedy playing in the 2 I’s, although the story is disputed by Parnes. Nevertheless, the story forms a part of skiffle folklore and marks the advent of commercial engagement in the amateur skiffle scene. The story of Tommy Steele is also said to have been the basis for Wolf Mankowitz’s musical *Expresso Bongo.*

## Coffee Bars and Skiffle on Film

Perhaps the most high-profile representation of skiffle and the espresso bar world of Soho is *Expresso Bongo*, subsequently adapted into a film release starring Laurence Harvey and a very young Cliff Richard.[[242]](#footnote-243) The musical made its debut at the Saville Theatre in London’s West End on 23 April 1958, but it was the release of the film in 1959 which really brought Mankowitz’s story to a wider audience. Following the arc of Tommy Steele’s experience with John Kennedy, a young singer Bongo Herbert is discovered in a Soho cellar by a scheming agent, Johnny Jackson, looking to cash in on the young star but ultimately out-witted by the record company. The film uses the coffee bar scene around Old Compton Street as its backdrop and incorporates the sleazy and exotic elements of Soho to tell a story about exploitation and the shady music-industry politics of Tin Pan Alley. The story reflects the generational interaction of the youthful amateur world of coffee bars and skiffle with the older commercial world of the record companies of Denmark Street, as was experienced by young skiffle stars like Steele and Richard.[[243]](#footnote-244)

Another English-made film, *Beat Girl*, directed by Edmond T. Gréville, was also released that year, and offers a different perspective on Soho and the coffee bar culture from that taken in Expresso Bongo. *Beat Girl* focuses on the teenager, in this case the ambiguously-aged Jennifer, played by a then 14-year-old Gillian Hills, and her band of angsty friends, including skiffle star Adam Faith, who frequent the ‘Off-Beat' coffee house in Soho. The Off-Beat appears in the film as a space free from the controls of parents, a space where this teenage subculture could express itself freely, through its own forms of language, music, dress and behaviour. The coffee bar appears as a representational space for teenagers - an outright ‘teenage’ space, produced through the social practices of teenagers, whether it be simply hanging out, listening to the jukebox or new forms of dance. One notable recurring theme of the dialogue in the coffee-bar scenes is the universal hatred of parents, whether they be military fathers, or the wealthy, absentee architect father of the main protagonist. This generational conflict plays out through teen rebellion and rejection of the parental generation’s values; parents are derided as ‘squares’ and the teenagers express their desire for ‘kicks’.[[244]](#footnote-245)

The type of language employed by the screenwriter for the teenage generation is an important factor when considering the film’s relationship to youth culture. While terms like squares and kicks, were widely used terms in youth culture lexicon by the late 1950s, the rest of the teenage argot used throughout the film comes across as clunky and uncredible, a strange mix of American beatnik and jazz slang, ‘daddy-o’ is used constantly, and some phrasing that appears completely made up: ‘Great dad, great, straight from the fridge’.[[245]](#footnote-246) The dialogue itself is suggestive of the generational divide between youth and adults in the late 1950s– the unconvincing dialogue reflecting an outsider, adult attempt to speak in a teen voice.

*Expresso Bongo* and *Beat Girl* were released in 1959, after the skiffle boom had reached its height and rock n roll began to supplant it as the teen genre of choice. Both films portrayed the coffee bars of Soho as spaces of teenage occupation, but they also asserted the increased role of music in the construction of teenage identity. Music, whether live or on a juke box, appears as a symbol of youthful rebellion and a marker of difference from their parents' generation. The production of these films at the end of the 1950s also points to the extent which coffee bars, skiffle and youth culture generally had entered popular culture and become objects of commercial interest and exploitation by the end of the decade.

## Conclusion

Skiffle and coffee bars were inextricably linked. Skiffle found a ready home in the coffee bar basements of Soho, particularly the 2 I’s. Skiffle’s boom period lasted only a few years before forces of commercialism professionalised its stars and skifflers moved in the directions of rock ‘n’ roll or into the emergent folk scene.[[246]](#footnote-247) Yet skiffle laid the foundations for the success of British rock ‘n’ roll bands like the Beatles, who began life as skiffle group, the Quarrymen. Dave Gelly has even argued that Merseybeat was just ‘electrified skiffle.’[[247]](#footnote-248) Trad jazz and skiffle are examples of how black American culture shaped the development of youth culture in Britain in the 1950s. These genres empowered young people to actively participate in the playing of music, and so turned the basements of coffee bars into spaces of youth participation. Skiffle’s do-it-yourself ethos and homemade instrumentation encouraged thousands of young people to take part in the creation of their own culture and the amateur surroundings of the coffee bar provided the perfect space for its practice.

# Conclusion

The coffee bar boom spread out far beyond its Soho heartland into provincial towns and cities all over Britain. For a few years they were a part of the mainstream discourse on youth culture through its representations in films like *Expresso Bongo* and *Beat Girl,* or through its associations to literary output of the Angry Young Men. From its origins as a showcase for the new Italian espresso technology of Achille Gaggia, the coffee bar developed into a space of social association and cultural practice for young people coming of age in the affluent society of the mid-1950s. The coffee bar provided a space outside the supervision of parents or state institutions where young people could keep each other's company, listen to the juke box or simply ‘hang out’.

The coffee bar was free from the restrictions of the public house in terms of age and opening hours. It was also free from the established cultural codes of the pub where adult forms of sociability and entertainment reigned, and in which occupation without continued consumption was frowned upon.[[248]](#footnote-249) The ability to spend extended periods without the expectation of further consumption was another key factor that facilitated the adoption of the coffee bars by young consumers.

The coffee bar also represented a space for young people where the structures of British society were contested through the social interaction of different classes, genders and races. Their occupation by youth points to the importance of generational divide in the 1950s. The *ULR* faction of the first New Left constructed their post-Hungary socialist politics largely through engagement with youth culture and increasingly came to see the ‘age gap as significant a lever of change as the old class divisions.’[[249]](#footnote-250) Their establishment of the Partisan Coffee House in the middle of Soho’s espresso bar landscape was one element of their political project that for the first time looked to the agency of youth culture as a force for change.

Amateurism was a defining feature of Soho’s coffee bars. Often owned and run by catering amateurs, this amateurism was reflected in the eclecticism of their interior design and decoration. The diversity apparent in coffee bars from the Moka to Le Macabre gives lie to the popular tropes of a coffee bar type furthered by the likes of Sandbrook. Difference was a key selling point to the youthful coffee bar habitués of Soho. Skiffle, the dominant artistic form associated with the coffee bar phenomenon, was also defined by amateurism and a low bar to entry. Skiffle flourished in the basements of Soho coffee bars like the 2 i's for a few years before being overtaken by the commercially dominant sounds of rock ‘n’ roll. The skiffle boom represents a moment of active participation and music making by thousands of young people, who found in the coffee bars of Soho a perfect space and audience. The coffee bars were therefore active spaces in the construction of youth identity and culture in the 1950s, not simply spaces of passive commercial consumption.

The mental and material space of Soho also played a vital role in facilitating the development of the coffee bar phenomenon. Soho’s physical difference to the commercial modernity of the West End around it played into the ideas of mental separation. Soho looked different, the layout of its streets was unrationalised and Georgian in character. This sense of difference, compounded by waves of immigration and an enduring legacy of bohemianism and non-conformity, created an attractive environment for youth cultures to co-opt. These longer-term influences met with cheap property leases in a Soho still scarred with bomb damage, combined with growing affluence in the 1950s that empowered willing amateurs to take a chance on opening a coffee bar. Soho, more than anywhere else, provided the perfect space for the coffee bar boom to emerge and thrive in 1950s Britain.

There are of course many gaps in this dissertation. Greater archival access could have created a more evenly balanced study on this subject. It would be interesting to study the lifespan of the Soho coffee bars and how they fared over their lifetimes, how they reacted to changing trends in music, fashion and consumption or changes Soho over the years. Charting their declining fortunes and how this related to changes in patterns of consumption and to changes in the character of youth culture could also be illuminating.

The coffee bar phenomenon emerged as an early commercial and social space that was accessible to youth. As this dissertation has explored it was the product of the economic and cultural context of the post-war period interacting with the longer-term legacies of Soho’s urban space, both material and mental. The Soho coffee bars emerged from the intersection of the transformations of British society in the post-war period, Italian technological innovation and an increasingly independent youth consumer market with Soho’s particular material fabric and established reputation for non-conformist behaviour.

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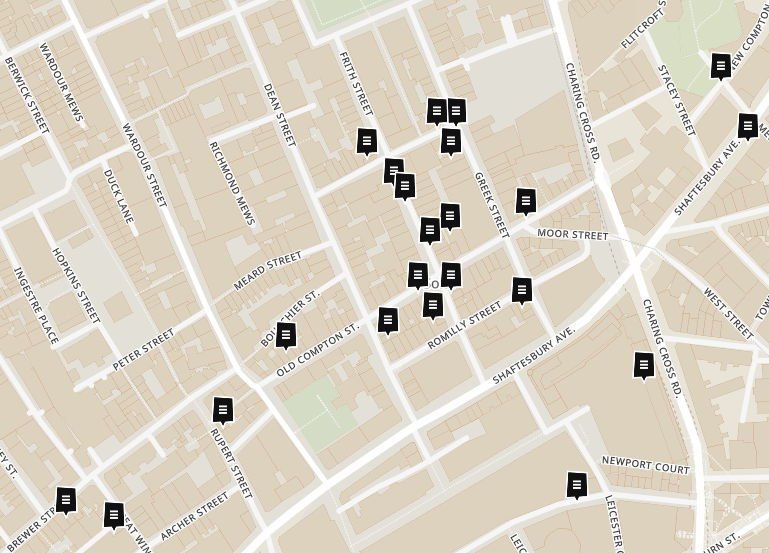
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# Appendix 1

Italian Catering Community in London 1939-1942. <<https://www.layersoflondon.org/map/collections/200>> [accessed 4 September 2020]

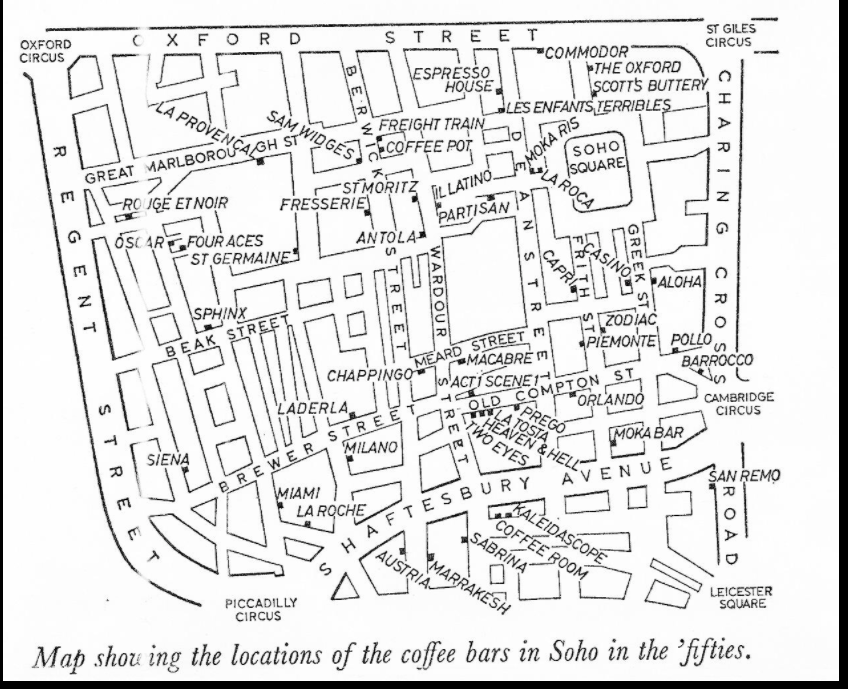
Screenshot of the above collection focused on area around Old Compton Street.



# Appendix 2

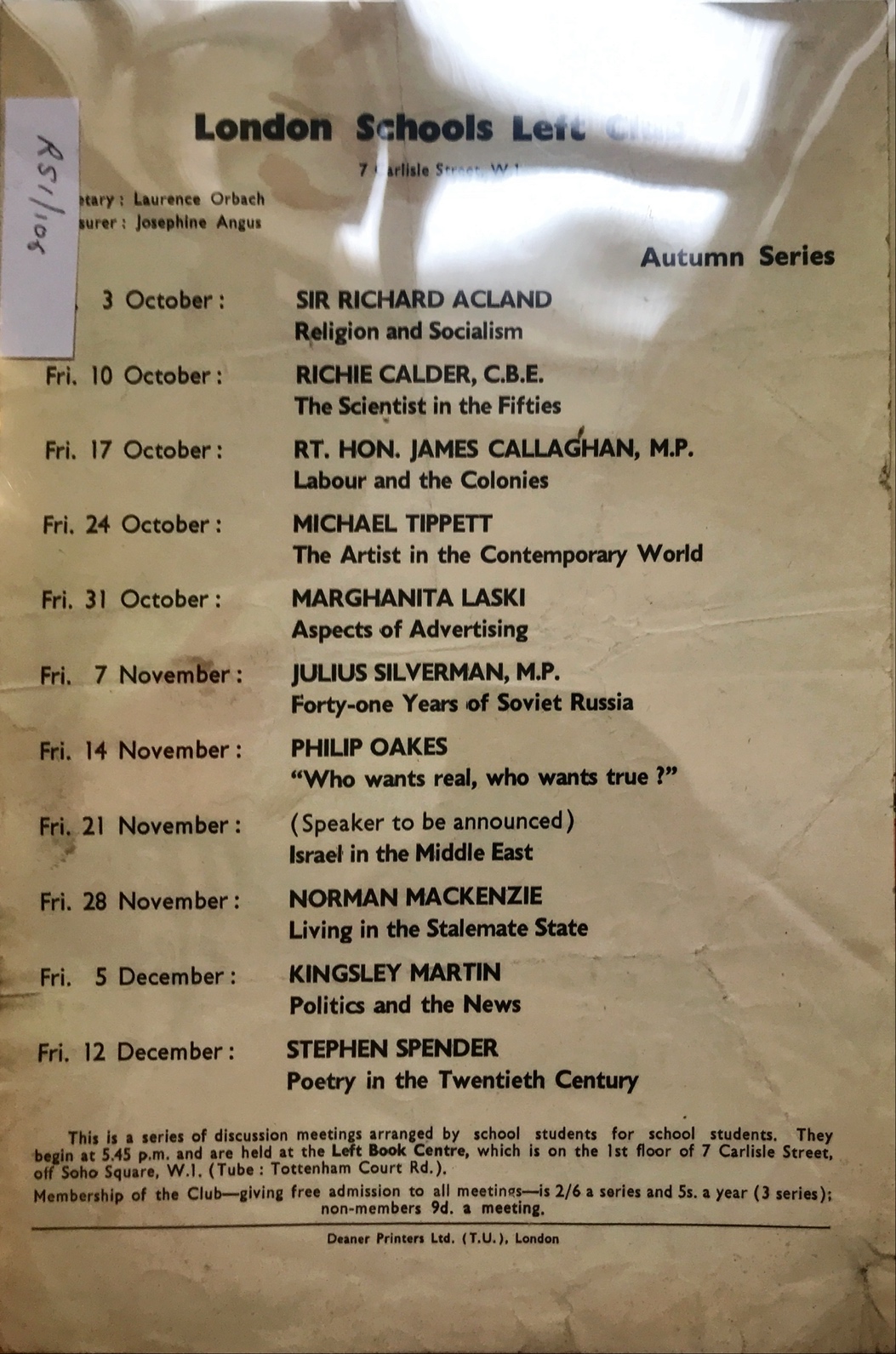
Map of the Soho Coffee Bars in the 1950s.

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20. Ibid., pp. 202-203. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
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166. Peter Sedgwick, ‘NATO, the bomb and socialism’, *ULR*, 7 (Autumn 1959), 7-13; Sedgwick, ’The two new lefts’, p.132. [↑](#footnote-ref-167)
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