

PUNK IS POLITICAL:
THE MISUNDERSTANDING OF
AN ACTIVIST COUNTERCULTURE

by

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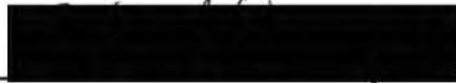
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Punk IS Political: The Misunderstanding of an Activist Counterculture

Thesis directed by Assistant Professor Anthony Robinson

ABSTRACT

Since its inception in the mid-1970s, the Punk counterculture has been misunderstood by mainstream society. Often depicting Punk as degenerate, apathetic Gen Xers bent on shock value and epitomizing the negative connotations of a "sex, drugs and rock'n'roll" lifestyle, the general public fails to understand that Punk is inherently political, and that's why it's had such lasting endurance, unlike so many pop fads. Whether they're protesting globalization in Seattle in overt political action, or more discreetly displaying political values by choosing to stand out in high school, the very nature of Punk is political at its roots. Although most 15-year-old kids don't consciously recognize the political nature of their newfound beliefs, and how that shapes the way they dress, the music they listen to or the people they associate with, politics is undoubtedly the foundation of this unique counterculture that often starts in the teen years and creates a lifelong devotion to a particular political ideology. By examining Punk bands' lyrics, the writing in Punk zines, the messages in Punk art and the Punk aesthetic, one will find that the underlying foundation is an anti-authority, anti-establishment political fervor. While it would be wrong to say that all Punks subscribe to one strict ideology, it is clear that they all have a tremendous dislike of authoritarian establishment, and thus tend to be extremely radical, often anarchists. And while the means to that end vary from one individual to another, and tend to be unique, Punks continue to work collectively not only to question authority, but to resist it, even 25 years after Punk was first recognized by the mainstream as a new musical genre. While most people identify Punks by their "funny" haircuts and colors, ripped T-shirts, safety pins, bondage pants, fishnet stockings, piercings and tattoos, there is more to Punk than meets the eye. There is a Punk that's more than skin deep, and it is found in a number of political causes, in which Punks have come to the forefront, not to mention Punk's connections to previous Left movements.

This abstract accurately represents the content of the candidate's thesis.
I recommend its publication.

Signed

A black rectangular box redacting the signature of Anthony Robinson.

Anthony Robinson

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to the worldwide Punk community, to whom I owe my inspiration, and to the unique individuals within that community who have both questioned and supported my work in our common goal to make the world a better place. I hope that I have been able to shed light on the true nature of our community and the fire burning within each of us. While what I say in these pages will undoubtedly be scrutinized, I look forward to these challenges and expect them from a community that I would not be so endeared to if it didn't continue to question the world. I couldn't have had better friends and teachers, and I thank you for letting me share my life and experiences with you.

I also dedicate this thesis to my partner, Brian D'Agosta, who has had to endure countless late nights listening to me banter on about this topic. Your unfaltering patience and suggestions have contributed much needed insight and helped me better understand why it was important for me to write this.

And to my family, who struggled for years to understand why such a "pretty" girl would dye her hair blue and cut it into a mohawk, why an "intelligent" teenager would have so many problems in school, what they must have done wrong raising me, and yet continued to unconditionally love and support me. I can only hope that other families might learn from this thesis what I tried so hard to explain to you all those years, and that they to will treat their little Punkers with as much respect as you have.

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I also wish to thank AK Press for supplying me with so much of my reading material over the years and particularly while I was researching this subject. AK Press is an invaluable resource for the Punk community, and yet another testament to what Punks can do when they follow their ambitions.

And to my friends Jon Schoeffel and Sarah Kriedler, thanks for taking the time to read this thesis and discuss it with me, keeping me true to a community that will forever be a part of all of us, no matter how old we get.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION — SO WHAT?

Since its inception in the mid-1970s, the Punk counterculture has been highly misunderstood by mainstream society. Often depicted in the media as degenerate, apathetic Gen Xers bent on shock value and epitomizing the negative connotations of a “sex, drugs and rock’n’roll” lifestyle, Punks face stereotypes on a daily basis that not only are personally hurtful, but also present major obstacles to their political ideals.

What the general public fails to understand is that Punk is inherently political, and that’s why it’s had such lasting endurance, unlike so many pop fads. Whether they’re protesting globalization in Seattle in overt political action, or more discreetly displaying political values by choosing to stand out in high school, the very nature of Punk is political at its roots. Although most 15-year-old kids don’t consciously recognize the political nature of their newfound beliefs, and how that shapes the way they dress, the music they listen to or the people they associate with, politics is undoubtedly the foundation of this unique counterculture that often starts in the teen years and creates a lifelong devotion to a particular political ideology.

So what is the ideology? By examining Punk bands’ lyrics, the writing in Punk zines, the messages in Punk art and the Punk aesthetic, one will

find that the underlying foundation of Punk is an anti-authority, anti-establishment political fervor. While it would be wrong to say that all Punks subscribe to one strict ideology, it is clear that they all have a tremendous dislike of authoritarian establishment, and thus tend to be extremely radical, often anarchists. And while the means to that end vary from one individual to another, and tend to be unique, Punks continue to work collectively not only to question authority, but to resist it, even 25 years after Punk was first recognized by the mainstream as a new music genre.

Although there are armchair activists in many cultures, Punks tend to get highly involved in the politics they preach. While most people identify Punks by their "funny" haircuts and colors, ripped T-shirts, safety pins, bondage pants, fish net stockings, piercings and tattoos, there is more to Punk than meets the eye. There is a Punk that's more than skin deep, and it is found in a number of political causes, in which Punks have come to the forefront.

Purpose of This Thesis

I first discovered Punk when I was about 12-years-old. It was 1990, I was in sixth grade, and I didn't quite fit in with any of my peers. Like so many others, the Punk community was a place where I could be myself — where the rules, standards and norms of society could safely be questioned

and resisted. Looking and acting “different” was no longer something of shame to be hidden, but a badge of honor to be worn proudly. The music I was introduced to spoke to me on a variety of levels, unlike the pop radio garbage my schoolmates listened to. I learned about tons of political ideas and ideals that fit with my understanding of the world and what I thought the world should be like.



Figure 1.1 Author Sabrina Henderson

My parents and family thought it was a rebellious teenage phase I would soon outgrow. A dozen years later, I can safely say that I have proven them wrong (something Punks revel in). My teachers said I was disruptive in class. But to this day I maintain that I learned more from Punk than any school could have ever taught me. I managed to find my own ways to cope through the monotony and mindlessness of the public school system, getting my high school diploma in three years, mainly so I could get out and start doing productive things in the real world.

I then went to college and earned my bachelor's degree in journalism, because I had learned from high school that sometimes you really can

change things from within the system. I became the singer for a Punk band, I volunteered for numerous organizations, I started my own zine, I became part of a collective, I worked at a co-op — I became part of the Punk community in as many ways as I could.

After graduating and becoming a reporter, I decided to broaden my knowledge of the systems I've so often been involved in protesting, and I went back to college to get my master's degree in political science. When I had to sit down and decide what to write my thesis on, I went through dozens of different ideas. And then it occurred to me that all of the things I was interested in researching and writing about were causes I was introduced to through the Punk scene.

I did some research and found that there really weren't any definitive works on the politics of Punk. There are bookshelves full of books about Punk music, and even fashion. I found one on Punk philosophy, and one on Punk zines. While almost all of them address the underlying political foundation of Punk, none examines it solely. And so it occurred to me that, almost 25 years after Punk was first acknowledged, it's about time someone attempt to document what a powerful activist counterculture it really is.

After all, I've been a Punk for half my life, and everyone I know, even people who no longer actively participate in the scene, will tell you that Punk is a lifestyle. It's like any other political philosophy — once it grabs hold of

you, it's engrained into your being. So why is it then, that after surviving a quarter century, Punk is still considered just a teenage phase of rebellion and angst? Why is it that we still aren't taken seriously?

The purpose of this thesis is to describe how Punk is, in fact, a political movement, and to define its significance. By going beyond its music and aesthetics and examining Punk's connection to earlier political countercultures, and by explaining its political philosophy and economy, we can discover the distinct political ideology of Punk and its significance.

Whether people agree with this ideology or not, it's about time it be recognized and respected as one of the most enduring countercultures of modern times. Punk has contributed enormously to almost every progressive cause and movement out there, and now has devotees spanning the globe. Perhaps more impressive, Punk has done it all in the face of media misrepresentation, public ignorance and censorship, while maintaining its cohesion without structure or rulers. For all these reasons and more, it's time for academia and the rest of the world to learn the truth — Punk IS political.

The Misunderstanding of Punk

Media Misrepresentation

Writing the introduction to Craig O'Hara's book The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!, Marc Bayard explains what compelled him to teach a college course on Punk:

The major problem trying to explain Punk is that it is not something that fits neatly into a box or categories. Not surprising as Punk had made the explicit aim of trying to destroy all boxes and labels. With that major hurdle, any project that tries to define Punk or explain it must do so with very broad brush strokes. Punk and Punk music cannot be pigeonholed to some spiked-haired white male wearing a leather jacket with a thousand metal spikes listening to music real loud... One of the main reasons for teaching this course was to dispel the misrepresentation of Punk to students with little or no knowledge of what the scene really contains and has to offer. The stereotypes that parents, television and the media fostered had to be countered.¹

In that same book, O'Hara devotes an entire chapter to media misrepresentation and the black eye Punk has been given as a result. "Television, films, comic strips and advertising have all misrepresented Punk to the mainstream public. Punk has been characterized as a self-destructive, violence-oriented fad."² He cites mid-'80s television shows like *Donahue*, *Alice*, *Silver Spoons*, *Chips*, *Quincy*, *Square Pegs*, and *21 Jump Street*, and films like *Class of 1984* and *Repo Man* as portraying Punks as violent,

¹ O'Hara, Craig. The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!. introduction by Marc Bayard, page 11.

² Ibid., page 42.

nihilistic drug-abusers who constantly shout and spit on each other, terrorize old ladies and are a direct cause of social problems.³

While such distortions didn't destroy the Punk scene, O'Hara says that they did succeed in giving the movement a number of hurdles to jump. For one, "portraying Punks as violent attracted people who were really violent to the scene...Punk suffered through a period of media created violence and stupidity which threatened to make Punk a parody of itself."⁴

It would be remiss to say that Punk hasn't had its fair share of problems. Early film documentaries about Punk reveal serious drug abuse, self-mutilation and violence, among other things. Almost any Punk will tell you they've seen these problems first-hand, often having been through them or having a close friend who has. O'Hara argues that the bulk of the problems within the Punk scene are a direct result of media distortion.⁵ "It is true that many Punks are violent, fashionable, apathetic teenagers. It is also true that Punks are not this way on the whole and the media misrepresentations have harmed the movement by increasing its ignorance factor," he says.⁶

³ O'Hara, Craig. The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!. page 44.

⁴ Ibid., page 45.

⁵ Ibid., page 44.

⁶ Ibid., page 46.

In addition to an unwanted influx of violence, O'Hara concludes that, "Perhaps the greatest damage the media has done to the American Punk scene has been the linkage between Punks and skinheads."⁷ Because Punks and skinheads both wore crew cut hair and had an interest in similar sounding music, they were often portrayed as being one and the same, despite their very different political views and the fighting that frequently took place between the two groups. The Punk community is almost always confused by the media with other sub-cultures, and members are frequently mislabeled as Goths or Skinheads, portrayed as apathetic Generation-Xers, Satanists, or acknowledged merely in a fashion sense. While there is undoubtedly some overlap, punks feel these incorrect labels solidify negative stereotypes among the general public.

According to an article by Mark Solotroff, Richard Hell is often credited by music journalists for creating the defining punk aesthetic that included torn T-shirts, coarsely cropped hair, and well-worn blue jeans; a style that [punk band] Sex Pistols manager Malcolm McLaren purportedly observed and took back to England as the punk subculture was about to surface there.⁸ Hell is also noted for coining the phrase "Blank Generation," which became the title of a song, an album, and a movie, as well as an

⁷ O'Hara, Craig. The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!, page 47.

⁸ Solotroff, Mark. Daily Dose, *Blank Generation*, 1999, page 1.

inspiration for numerous slogans and catchphrases that later penetrated as far as the marketing and advertising world's heavily promoted and initially disapproving catchphrase "Generation X." Of this phrase, Hell has been quoted as saying that it was misread, and that he intended to express the concept that "blank" was a positive idea that offered a person the possibility of "making yourself anything you want—filling in the blank."⁹ Punks are a marketing favorite when it comes to portraying the angry and apathetic Gen-X lifestyle—their Mohawk hairstyles and safety pinned clothing creating a marketable image quite the contrary of its original intentions.

"While punk means many things to many different people [in the group], almost everyone of us would tell you our style is about debunking social norms and expressing your individuality however you want to," said Brian D'Agosta, a 28-year-old punk. "And while some punks have mohawks and wear bondage pants and ripped T-shirts, I can almost guaranty that all of us outgrow that fashion at some point, but you never lose being punk. It's a lifestyle." And it's a lifestyle that they hate to be confused with Goths or Skinheads. "Punks are really the antithesis of Skinheads," explains Jon Schoeffel. "But for some reason, the media thinks that if you shave your head, you must be a Nazi." Punk-rock bassist Sarah Kriedler agrees, sarcastically adding, "Yeah, and if you wear black a lot, you must be Goth."

⁹ Solotroff, Mark. Daily Dose, *Blank Generation*, 1999, page 1.

So, what's the difference? "Goths are really into old European Gothic architecture and fashion and they generally listen to slow, ambient, kinda depressing music. Punk rock came about out of a music genre that wanted to kill the rock star and make it so that anyone could play music. So, we play fast, simple four-chord progressions, and admittedly, we're pretty aggressive. But the thing that bugs me most is that the media fails to recognize that most punks are also extremely politically active radicals. We're not just about music or fashion—just listen to the lyrics."

Despite various inadequate and inaccurate depictions of Punk throughout the years, the counterculture remains a significant political force. In the coming chapters, one will see that Punk echoes many of the philosophies and aesthetics of several leftist countercultures before it, and that the political climate of the day has shaped the political response of the Punk movement since its inception. By examining the basic political philosophy of Punk and the issues that Punks champion, we can unveil the historical and contemporary significance of this movement. Recognizing the political economy at the center of the counterculture makes a concrete and substantial community more realistic and tangible. With the mass media having failed to keep Punk down with derogatory depictions, this thesis also will assess current attempts to co-opt Punk into a sellable consumer commodity, thereby destroying its capacity to threaten the status quo.

CHAPTER 2

A HISTORY OF PUNK

Links to Countercultural

Movements of the Past

To some extent, all countercultures can be defined by and compared to links with preceding countercultures, and this is also the case with Punk. As we have seen, Punk is typically portrayed by the media, and therefore thought of by the general public, as simply a musical genre that has attracted a rather small group of rebellious, angry teenagers — a pop fad that most kids will easily (and hopefully quickly) outgrow. In fact, over the past 25 years, Punk repeatedly has been pronounced dead — a bygone era. However, it can be argued that Punk is actually much more than a teen fad in that its ideas, philosophies and political activism are combinations and extensions of previous countercultures. And like so many countercultures before it, Punk has incorporated itself into quite a few other political movements.

In many ways, Punk is not so different from a number of countercultural movements before it — a generation of youth felt let down by their parents and decided to do something about it, opposing what they

perceived as the corrupt establishment of the generation before them. As we look back through the 20th century, it is easy to see the influence that earlier countercultures had on Punk, and interesting to see how they were combined and transformed to fit a new generation of discontent youth. Punk used some of the more successful strategies of prior movements, as well as learning from their failures.

In order to examine fairly whether Punk is in fact a politically significant counterculture, we must understand a brief history of its predecessors and determine whether it can be identified as an extension of them. While the philosophy of Punk will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter, one can begin to understand the basic ideology and philosophy behind it by understanding the revolutionary actors that came before it and the ideas they contributed that were later incorporated into Punk.

The American Left

In The Rise and Fall of the American Left, John Patrick Diggins traces the history of the left in the United States throughout the 20th century, concluding that revolutionary political thought has retreated from the activity

of the streets into the safety of higher learning institutions.¹⁰ While Diggins admits, "The 1980s witnessed something of a counterrevolution when the Reagan administration set out to dismantle the welfare state,"¹¹ he proclaims that "...much of the youth of the '80s supported Reagan..." and those who didn't had lost all interest in political and civic responsibility or had become liberal professors at colleges throughout the country.¹² Diggins never mentions Punk in his book; in making such blanket statements about the late 1970s and '80s, he denies the existence of Punk in America and neglects the importance of the political opposition that was at its core. Instead Diggins asserts that the American Left is now "in a state of decline and fall."¹³ It is entirely feasible that Diggins, like so many others, missed the political significance of the Punk movement because of the sweeping media misrepresentation noted before. But an examination of the characteristics Diggins uses to define the American Left makes it obvious that Punk wasn't (and isn't) so different from the revolutionary thinkers that came before it, and that what Diggins defines as the American Left may very well be alive and well in the Punk movement.

¹⁰ Diggins, John Patrick. The Rise and Fall of the American Left, pages 279-306.

¹¹ Ibid., page 285.

¹² Ibid., pages 287-285.

¹³ Ibid., page 16.

Here I must note that scholars have yet to agree upon whether Punk began in the United States or in England, but it is generally accepted that the movement was first overtly political in England. It wasn't until around 1980 and the election of President Ronald Reagan that Punk in the United States became distinctly political. But as Diggins notes in his book, countercultures often got their ideas and direction from similar revolutionary movements abroad, as well as from their predecessors.

In identifying and explaining the American Left, Diggins aimed to "describe the sensibilities and styles of thought that a radical intellectual movement assumes as a means of mobilizing its emotional energies; to explain the philosophical posture that movement adopts as a means of negating prevailing sentiments that sustain existing order; and to analyze historical developments that account for the deradicalization of the Left as a generation phenomenon."¹⁴ The same criteria can be used to show Punks' connections to and differences with the American Left.

¹⁴ Diggins, John Patrick. The Rise and Fall of the American Left, page 19.

The American Left in Diggins' survey originally rose out of the ideas of Transcendental thinkers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau who "cursed the 'corpse-cold' nature of institutions and protested a society in which 'man is thus metamorphosed into a thing,'" and championed instead civil disobedience as an escape from the mechanistic doom of bureaucracy.¹⁵ Diggins argues that all of the American Left movements have continued that legacy of dissent and "assumed that true freedom begins only when capitalism ends."¹⁶ And yet, he admits that the Left has "never, on a national level, been a political party or an effectively organized political movement. ... Rather it has been something of a spontaneous moral impulse...suspicious of power and distrustful of politics."¹⁷



Figure 2.1 Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau

He says that the Left negates ideas of reform, seeking instead to transcend and transform society by realizing revolutionary utopian ideals.¹⁸ Movements of the Left have also been identified as generational because

¹⁵ Diggins, John Patrick. The Rise and Fall of the American Left, page 18.

¹⁶ Ibid., pages 34-35.

¹⁷ Ibid., page 40.

¹⁸ Ibid., page 41.

they are typically youth movements that form “as a result of common ‘destabilizing’ experiences, [and] begin to feel, articulate and defend the identity of certain values and ideals in a society that is indifferent or hostile.”¹⁹ Notably, Diggins says that the American Left has also always tried to ally itself with the proletarian working classes, even though they often do not themselves come from lower economic or social classes, and therefore may not have corresponding ideas and values.²⁰ All of these things can also be said of Punk.

Before going into more specific American Left movements, I must also caution the reader that many Punks consider themselves far more revolutionary than the reformist “Left” that we commonly think of today. However, even if Punks today think they are more radical than the American Left has ever been, it is important to note that so too did the Lefts before them. And while there are notable differences between previous American Lefts and Punks, there are significant historical connections as well.

The New Intellectuals, Lyrical Left and Anarchists

In 1913, a “colony of infidels and iconoclasts” formed in Manhattan’s Greenwich Village that synthesized cultural rebellion with social revolution,

¹⁹ Diggins, John Patrick. The Rise and Fall of the American Left, page 44.

²⁰ Ibid., page 45.

art and activism.²¹ The New intellectuals “felt estranged from the prevalent values of American society,” and sought to “conquer the world armed not with a systematic ideology but with a vague strategy of class conflict and working-class struggle.”²² Many of its foremost thinkers, including Max Eastman and Walter Lippman,



Figure 2.2 Anarchist Emma Goldman

were heavily influenced by doctrines of European socialism, and thus, the Lyrical Left championed Marxism as a “creative adventure as well as a pragmatic science.”²³ Many among the Lyrical Left divided “not over the goal of socialism, but how to achieve it.”²⁴ One of those splits was over the tactic of violence, which was usually (although perhaps incorrectly) associated with anarchism.

On the sidelines of the Lyrical Left were anarchist revolutionaries like Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, who opposed all ideas of authority and coercion, in favor of a stateless, classless society. New Lifter Max Nomad called anarchism a “political daydream” reflecting the “utter

²¹ Diggins, John Patrick. The Rise and Fall of the American Left, pages 56-57.

²² *Ibid.*, pages 60-61.

²³ *Ibid.*, page 59.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, page 77.

hopelessness and desperation of the disinherited," according to Diggins. The violence that arose from such cynicism became a "sustained doctrine of class warfare among the International Workers of the World," an unorganized anarcho-syndicalist group of



Figure 2.3 Lyrical Left portrayal of Lenin

mostly lumbermen and miners, also known as the Wobblies, whose radical folk songs are still well-known among the Left.²⁵ While the group's violence was exaggerated, the violent strikes the group participated in eventually got it kicked out of the Socialist Party, making it "more attractive to the Left in its fight against respectability."²⁶

Despite connections with groups like the Wobblies, the New Intellectuals and the Lyrical Left were never able to reconcile their intellectualism with that of the proletariat. While Punk ideology mirrors many of the characteristics of the Lyrical Left, Punk hasn't been often been portrayed as intellectualism. In fact, Punk is more reflective of the proletariat than the New Intellectuals were in that sense, and Punks identify more strongly with the radical anarchist ideology of the 1910s than they ever did

²⁵ Diggins, John Patrick. The Rise and Fall of the American Left, page 79.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, page 82.

with intellectual theorists like Marx. Several early Punk bands called socialist and Marxist leaders 'fascists' who just wanted to create another system of power, rather than the peaceful anarchy they sought. In this way, modern Punk is more similar to the more romantic, less intellectual, elements of the Lyrical Left that Diggins describes. Both groups were full of young people attacking genteel tradition, bourgeois tastes and the "condescending certainty that [society] had found ultimate truth and absolute value."²⁷ The Lyrical Left's synthesis of art and activism can be seen as an obvious foundational element of Punk, and so too can its elements of disorganization and lack of cohesion. The Lyrical Left was named after its "lyrical impulse" to integrate conflicting synergistic and entropic values,²⁸ just as Punk sought to bring the diverse voices of the oppressed to the public's attention, often through shocking artistic displays.

Avant-Garde Art and Dadaism

Craig O'Hara said that while Punk is much more than an art form, comparisons to early avant-garde art movements are helpful in understanding some of the revolutionary tactics Punks unknowingly mirrored. He cites the Futurist movement launched by Filippo Marinetti in 1909 as influential in its rejection of traditional art forms and audience

²⁷ Diggins, John Patrick. The Rise and Fall of the American Left, page 97.

²⁸ Ibid., page 95.

participation, saying, "This audience involvement is an important link between the art and Punk movements as both have attempted to break down barriers present in the performer/viewer relationship."²⁹ O'Hara argues that the Futurists' anti-art message was expressed by wearing "outrageous clothes, earrings and make-up," something Punks obviously adopted.³⁰ He also says the Dada movement of 1916-'22 in France was similar to Punk's vigorous rejection of all previous existing social and aesthetic values. While he says most Punks would dislike Dadaist art's abstract (as opposed to overt) subversiveness, the influence is notable.³¹ Like avant garde art, modern dance and Dadaism, Punk has a similar spontaneous moral impulse that characterizes the romantic, artistic Lyrical Left.

The Old Left

By the 1920s, "communism had few admirers among those who had been prewar intellectual rebels" of the bohemian Lyrical Left. These Bohemians believed that the "infantile disorder" Lenin often disparaged in his efforts

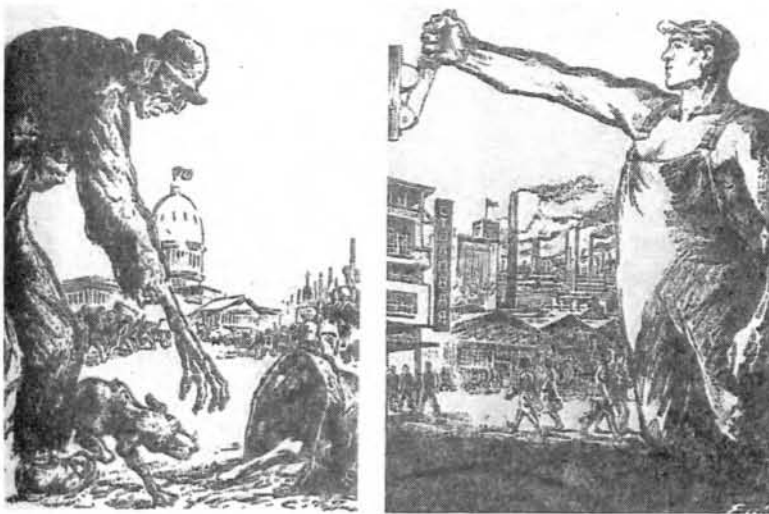


Figure 2.4 1920s Left poster art

²⁹ O'Hara, Craig. The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!, page 33.

³⁰ Ibid., page 34.

³¹ Ibid., pages 32-33.



to build
institutionalized
socialism was part
of revolutionary
adventure.³²

Figure 2.5 1930s Left poster art

But the advance of industrialism seemed to promise the expatriation of capitalism, and therefore reinforced Lenin's institutionalized Marxism. When the stock market crashed in the fall of 1929, what we now call the Old Left rose out of the "anxieties and insecurities of the Depression,"³³ as well as frustration with the apathy of the country's working class. So too did Punk rise out of the anxiety and insecurity of poverty in England, and the apathy of America in the mid-1970s. But the Old Left was driven by a focused desire to replace the oppressive systems of their day with specific new systems, namely socialism. And as was noted before, Punk had more in common with the Lyrical Left that sought to "assault traditional structure and

³² Diggins, John Patrick. The Rise and Fall of the American Left, page 113.

³³ Ibid., page 164.

authority"³⁴ in a more widespread manner, and Punks had less interest in replacing what they destroyed.

The New Left

The Old Left grew old, became jaded and disenchanted after the possibility of revolution seemed quashed, and the New Left accused its predecessors of committing the sins of its fathers "by becoming establishment liberals."³⁵ The Old Left had grown out of an abundance of poverty, much like British Punk, while the New Left grew out of a poverty of abundance, much like American Punk. "Jaded by affluence, estranged by parents who so valued this affluence, young radicals began to sense that their middle-class alienation had something in common with lower-class exploitation," in the early '60s.³⁶ The New Left began to grow, as early as 1958 in mid-Western universities, as a way to "activate the apathetic."³⁷ One of the movement's forerunners, Students for a Democratic Society "had no place for authority and leadership," much like Punk anarchists.³⁸ They relied more on "feel than theory" and found Old Left Marxism to be too intensely

³⁴ Diggins, John Patrick. The Rise and Fall of the American Left, page 164.

³⁵ Ibid., page 232.

³⁶ Ibid., page 220.

³⁷ Ibid., page 230.

³⁸ Ibid., page 230.

ideological and scientific.³⁹ Perhaps because it started as a students' movement, the New Left was the first generation to proclaim "never trust anyone over 30."⁴⁰ Punk is also primarily a youth movement, skeptical of adult authority.

While the American Left has always had a healthy amount of strife and violence, it was originally focused on industrial labor strikes. It was SDS that "introduced a novel form of radical violence: the campus confrontation," that "all but paralyzed the academic world from 1964 to the end of the decade."⁴¹ The Modern Language Association's president Louis Kampf advised students on how to behave at New York's Lincoln Center, saying, "Not a performance should go by without disruption. The fountains should be dried with calcium chloride, the statuary pissed on, the walls smeared with shit."⁴² The confrontational and shocking tactics used by the New Left proved so effective, it should come as no surprise that Punks later utilized the same confrontational and shocking behaviors as a foundation. It almost seems comical that the grown children of the '60s were at all disturbed by Punks using the very strategies they had created on campuses across the country only a decade earlier. But having lived through the fear of violent

³⁹ Diggins, John Patrick. The Rise and Fall of the American Left, page 233.

⁴⁰ Ibid., page 234.

⁴¹ Ibid., page 248.

⁴² Ibid., page 252.

campus confrontations exploding into student deaths, armed Black Panthers and bombing Weathermen seemed to make Punk that much more of a threat to the previous generation.

The Beats and the Hippies

It is important to differentiate the New Left from the "Hippies."

Although both groups reflected youths' frustration and powerlessness in the '60s, Diggins points out, "Much of the New Left disdained Hippies, with their childlike fascination with beads and flowers, exotic dress, mind-withdrawing drugs and erotic freedom."⁴³ Like New Left political activists, early Punks made it clear that they found Hippies and everything they stood for to be revolting. The Hippies were antipolitical, passive, indifferent, ethereal. They embodied the co-optation and diluting of the New Left ideals — they were safe. Here is how Diggins describes the New Left's disdain for the Hippie lifestyle:

If feeling determines reality, as the Hippies maintained, then the poor and oppressed were merely those who felt poor and oppressed. Salvation lay not in changing conditions but in changing perceptions — and the door to perception was not politics but psychedelia ("Imagination is revolution!"). Moreover, when the Hippies spoke of peace and love, they were talking

⁴³ Diggins, John Patrick. The Rise and Fall of the American Left, page 243.

about an ethic of passivity, a creative quietism that seemed dangerously innocent to experienced activists,⁴⁴

Although Punks would shudder in contempt at any comparison between them and Hippies, some music historians have done just that. John Street draws parallels in his book Rebel Rock: The Politics of Popular Music, but also notes the differences:

Once the Hippies' trust in music's ability to set them free had been established, music's political significance would always be different but it would not necessarily disappear. Punk was proof of this. Here was the semblance of a political movement, organized around unemployment, whose voice was expressed almost exclusively through a series of three-chord roars. Like Flower Power, the politics were vague, being more concerned with feelings than policies; and once again its vagueness was crucial both to the movement's popularity and to the role played by the music. In terms of organization (or lack of it) and in terms of political precision (or lack of it), Punk and Flower Power were very similar, but the concerns of their politics and the quality of their sounds were importantly different. The benign hopes of Flower Power contrasted starkly with the disconsolate frustration of Punk, a comparison that is reflected in the dreamy melodies and pastoral sentiments of psychedelic music, and in the staccato roar and defiant slogans of Punk — 'No Fun', 'Pretty Vacant', 'Anarchy'. While Flower Power spoke of the alternatives to work, Punk talked of the absence of work.⁴⁵

Street notes that the same self-conscious politics of the '60s was revived in Punk, but that the musical indulgences were rejected.⁴⁶ Both Punks and Hippies made an "explicit connection between artistic and political life,"

⁴⁴ Diggins, John Patrick. The Rise and Fall of the American Left, page 247-248.

⁴⁵ Street, John. Rebel Rock: The Politics of Popular Music, page 76, parenthesis in original.

⁴⁶ Ibid., page 175.

believing that music was not only art, but that writing a song was akin to writing a manifesto.⁴⁷

Diggins notes that Hippies were ethereal, spiritual and generally a happy lot, and so Punk might mirror more of the attitudes of the Hippies' predecessors, the Beatniks, who were pagan, earthy and angry. Much of the style of the Beats — the smoke-filled, dark, underground rooms they performed in, their dirty, tight, striped shirts, and the anger and discontent they felt in a consumer society — was carried on into the rock'n'roll era that eventually spun out the Rolling Stones, Iggy and the Stooges and other proto-Punk groups that flatly rejected hippie-folk and disco.

The Beats were also the first white youth movement to identify with and adopt black culture, which, we will see, the Punks also did. The Beats adored the Black community's jazz, as it captured the freedoms of an individual "trapped in a cruel environment of mean streets and tenements, [who had] by a curious inversion also emerged the ultimate victor."⁴⁸ Writers like Norman Mailer and Jack Kerouac observed in black culture what "could serve for white youth as the model of freedom-in-bondage."⁴⁹ Unlike their contemporaries, the Hipsters, the Beatniks did not desire upward mobility, but "expressed a magical relation to a poverty which constituted in his

⁴⁷ Street, John. Rebel Rock: The Politics of Popular Music, page 127.

⁴⁸ Hebdidge, Dick. Subculture: The Meaning of Style, page 47.

⁴⁹ Ibid., page 47-48.

imagination a divine essence, a state of grace, a sanctuary." In many ways, Punks captured the Beatniks' romanticism of poverty and expressed it in more extreme style. Unlike the Hippies, who believed you could easily override the oppression of poverty with a change in attitude, the Beatniks and the Punks made it their game to express poverty rather than ignore it. Instead of placidly accepting their oppression, they artistically shoved it in the faces of their oppressors, and in doing so found their own kind of freedom. It was the freedom of fighting back — a stance too confrontational for the Hippies.

Nevertheless, in an interview published in Punk Planet and reprinted in We Owe You Nothing — Punk Planet: The Collected Interviews, Jello Biafra, the singer of the legendary Punk band, the Dead Kennedys, states that the "heart and soul of Punk" is the same as "the heart and soul of the Hippies when they were radical, the Beats, and many others throughout history."⁵⁰ While there are some differences in philosophy and overall goals, Punks' use of creativity and art to express disdain for mainstream culture and politics clearly ties it to previous countercultural movements, including the Beats, the Hippies, and the previous American Lefts, implying that it is no more or less politically significant than its predecessors.

⁵⁰ Sinker, Daniel. We Owe You Nothing — Punk Planet: The Collected Interviews, page 42.

Rock'n'Roll, the Teddys and the Mods

Craig O'Hara contends that the 1960s' rock movement met the same fate as others before it as it was diluted through commercialism, becoming predictable and mainstream.⁵¹

A look back at the radicals of the '60s, and I don't mean the Hippies who were content to wear flowers and beg for change in San Francisco, shows their passion for rock music and the integral link rock'n'roll played in their politics. From the Black Panthers falling in love with Bob Dylan in Oakland, Calif., to White Panther John Sinclair and his MC5 brothers calling for armed revolution in Michigan, these folks all recognized and appreciated the power of rock music as the people's music. Prior to death and sell-outs, '60s' radicals Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman along with countless others, channeled rock'n'roll to create an enormous anti-government movement made up of young dissatisfied freaks.⁵²

As jazz combined with gospel and blues, country and western, and eventually transformed into early rock'n'roll, the connection to the poverty of Blacks was taken out of context and almost forgotten. The commodification of rock'n'roll allowed youth rebellion to exist in a vacuum. Youth in England were even further disconnected from the jazz roots in America, and from this arose the Teddy Boys, a youth movement disconnected from the working classes, and yet stuck with the drab reality of day-to-day routines — school, work, family. The history of rock'n'roll was concealed from the Teddys, and

⁵¹ O'Hara, Craig. The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!, page 24.

⁵² Ibid., page 24.

"appeared to be merely the latest in a long chain of American novelties."⁵³

While the Teddys were defiant and obtrusive, they often clashed with Black immigrant populations in England.

But by the early '60s, West Indian immigrants had established themselves among white working class communities in England and began to reestablish some of the ties the Beatniks had with Blacks in America. The Mods were working class youth who had been brought up around foreign influences, identified with their struggles and sought to emulate their styles. More like the Hipsters than the Beats before them, the Mods had a definitive cleanness and conservatism about them. Unlike their macho counterpart, the Rockers, the Mods were effeminate in their tidy fashion sense. The Mods adopted an escapist tactic in their leisure activities — while still toiling under the system, they mastered the "gentle arts of escape and subversion," bending the rules to suit their own purposes.⁵⁴ Jim Curtis also establishes Punk's relationship with the Mods. "In its stress on working-class..., on personal entitlement, and on the symbolic role of clothing, Punk represented a further development of Mod..."⁵⁵

⁵³ Hebdidge, Dick. Subculture: The Meaning of Style, page 50.

⁵⁴ Ibid., page 54.

⁵⁵ Curtis, Jim. Rock Eras: Interpretations of Music & Society, 1954-1984, page 312.

Skinheads, Reggae and Ska

By 1966, the Mods began to break apart, with the more fashion-conscious of the group merging into the Hippie culture and the 'hard Mods' relinquishing their bourgeois black suits for an aggressive, working-class look, including workman's boots, jeans, braces (thin suspenders) and short-cropped hair. They were "aggressively proletarian, puritanical and chauvinist."⁵⁶ Out of this group came the skinheads, who solidified their own identity by 1970.

While Punks have always tried to distance themselves from racist skinheads, part of the difficulty in doing so arose from a shared interest in ska, rocksteady and reggae that originated with the early British (anti-racist) skinheads. The skinheads identified with the Rude Boy subculture of young, delinquent Blacks from working class families in England. Both the Rude Boys and the Skinheads of the early '70s attempted to combine a clean-cut delinquent look with the 'hard' stereotypes of lumpen proletariat men. (Eventually, the stress on "lumpen" among skinheads led to their identification with racist ideology, and the Nazi youth subculture that so many Punks were misidentified with in the '80s and '90s.) Hebdidge argues, "Ironically, those values conventionally associated with white working class culture which had been eroded by time, by relative affluence and by the

⁵⁶ Hebdidge, Dick. Subculture: The Meaning of Style, page 55.

disruption of the physical environment in which they had been rooted, were rediscovered embedded in Black West Indian culture," by the skinheads.⁵⁷ The Rude boys listened to ska, an outgrowth of reggae that had a "rude" choppy meter. The religious tone of reggae was broken down, but the music itself would reemerge again in Punk a decade later. Curtis cites The Clash as having been the most recognizable Punk band to display their interest in reggae and ska.⁵⁸ As does Dick Hebdidge, saying, "The Clash and the Slits in particular wove reggae slogans and themes into their material, and in 1977 the reggae group Culture produced a song describing the impending apocalypse entitled 'When the Two Sevens Clash,' which became something of a catchphrase in select Punk circles."⁵⁹ He says that reggae became the only tolerated alternative to Punk and was regularly played in clubs between Punk bands' sets.

It is generally accepted that Punk drew on influences from other musical styles like reggae and ska that came from other oppressed groups of youth with whom Punks felt an affinity. As unemployment, police harassment and general poverty grew in England, the post-war working

⁵⁷ Hebdidge, Dick. Subculture: The Meaning of Style, page 57.

⁵⁸ Curtis, Jim. Rock Eras: Interpretations of Music & Society, 1954-1984, page 313.

⁵⁹ Hebdidge, Dick. Subculture: The Meaning of Style, page 67.

class youth "celebrated the individual status of revolt"⁶⁰ through the culture of music, art and personal expression, much like the revolutionaries before them and the Punks who would come next.

Glam Rock and Proto-Punk

As the Vietnam War drew to a close, both the New Left and the Hippies had been relatively shut down in America. And as the working class struggle continued in England, it had grown up and became tired in the United States, to be replaced by consumerist pop-culture. Out of the free-love drug culture of the Hippies emerged disco with its nightclub scenes, one-night stands and cocaine addictions. And the progressive rock bands of the '60s gave way to ballad rock, completely devoid of politics. From this consumer vacuum sprang glam rock, attracting a cult-like massive youth following.⁶¹

"David Bowie was applauded for the 'Nietzschean spirit' to be detected in songs like 'Changes,' 'Quicksands' (from *Hunky Dory*) and 'Starman' (from *Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*)," says Street.⁶² But while Bowie's gender-bending costumes may have later influenced some Punk aesthetic, he was generally despised and taunted by the Punk

⁶⁰ Hebdidge, Dick. Subculture: The Meaning of Style, page 67.

⁶¹ Ibid., page 60.

⁶² Street, John. Rebel Rock: The Politics of Popular Music, page 53.

community for his widespread acceptance. "Not only was Bowie patently uninterested either in contemporary political and social issues or in working class life in general, but his entire aesthetic was predicated upon a deliberate avoidance of the 'real' world..."⁶³ Like the Hippies before him, Bowie's basic message was escape, this time into a fantasy or science fiction world rather than just psychedelics. And while many youth despised glam rock's shift away from class-consciousness, it did question the normative definitions of gender and sexuality.

By the mid-'70s, teenyboppers were preoccupied with glitter bands like Marc Bolan, Gary Glitter and Alvin Stardust, and older, more self-conscious teenagers were drawn to the more esoteric artists like Bowie, Lou Reed, New York Dolls and Roxy Music. The latter are now considered the beginnings of proto-punk.

According to Hebdidge, Punk can then be viewed partly "as an attempt to expose glam rock's implicit contradictions."⁶⁴ Punk was down and dirty in defiance of the elegance and verbosity of the glam rockers, and was in fact designed to undercut the snobbishness of the pop superstars. This reaction turned Punk back to the working class relevance of reggae, which "carried the necessary conviction, the political bite, so obviously

⁶³ Hebdidge, Dick. Subculture: The Meaning of Style, page 61.

⁶⁴ Ibid., page 63.

missing in most contemporary white music."⁶⁵ Ironically, the artistry and genderbending of the glam rockers is everywhere in the Punk aesthetic, albeit safety-pinned together with the tattered clothing of the working poor.

But it must be noted that Punk also drew on the influence of distinctly proto-punk bands, like Iggy (Pop) and the Stooges, The Ramones, The Who, Richard Hell, Patti Smyth and others.⁶⁶

Curtis says that Punk is often oversimplified by "neglecting its relationship with the past":

'No Feelings' [by the Sex Pistols] owes a debt to that great earlier anthem of personal entitlement, 'Get Off My Cloud' [by the Rolling Stones], just as 'Get Off My Cloud' itself owes a debt to 'Blue Suede Shoes' [performed by Elvis]. Similarly, the infamous 'Anarchy in the U.K.' [by the Sex Pistols], which went to #2 despite being banned, owes a debt to 'Paint It Black' [by the Rolling Stones] as surely as Black Sabbath's 'Paranoid' does.⁶⁷

Curtis evidences this point by reference to the Punk band Generation X's self-titled response to The Who's song 'My Generation.' He contends that Punk took themes from The Who, and further simplified the music in the name of "populism and anti-elitism," with performers who knew only three chords and made little or no distinction between performer and audience.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Hebdidge, Dick. Subculture: The Meaning of Style, page 63.

⁶⁶ Ibid., page 25.

⁶⁷ Curtis, Jim. Rock Eras: Interpretations of Music & Society, 1954-1984, page 312.

⁶⁸ Ibid., page 312.

As we have seen thus far, "Punk claimed a dubious parentage."⁶⁹

Punk synthesized and melded elements going as far back as the turn of the century with the working class creativity of the anarchists and Lyrical Left; the artistry of the avant-garde movement; the confrontation tactics of the New Left; the earthiness of the Beats; the oppression expressed and denied simultaneously in jazz, reggae and ska; the narcissism, nihilism and genderbending of glam rock; and the minimalism of proto-punk. Each of these influences has had its own political dimension, if only musically, allowing people to break away from societal norms and express their discontent through emotion rather than reason. Punk inherited the unique political approaches of each of its predecessors, and melded them into its own. But before the birth of any group of revolutionaries can take place, there must be a political environment that gives rise to it. By the mid-'70s, the environment would prove ripe for the plucking of a new political counterculture — taken from its predecessors — but unlike any before it.

The Political Climate from Which Punk Emerged

As we have seen, all countercultural and revolutionary political movements have their roots in history, but they are also born of the current political climate in which they take shape. While some movements have

⁶⁹ Hebdidge, Dick. Subculture: The Meaning of Style, page 25.

taken shape on the heels of other international movements, like the Lyrical Left, others have come about in the desperation of poverty, like the Old Left, and others still from the void left by material plenty, like the New Left. What is somewhat unique about Punk is that it grew up in two different countries, the United States and England, at roughly the same time, but under different circumstances. Craig O'Hara said:

The time and birthplace of the Punk movement is debatable. Either the New York scene of the late '60s/early '70s or the British Punk of 1975-76 can be given the honor. For our purposes, neither one deserves a long investigation, as the specific politics and genuine forming of a movement was not until the late '70s. In general it is thought that the New Yorkers invented the musical style while the British popularized the political attitude and the colorful appearances.⁷⁰

England's Dreaming

Because it is widely agreed that Punk first became politically aware in Britain, a look at the political environment there reveals the foundation on which the counterculture was initially built. The summer of 1976 was a record-breaking year of hot, dry weather in England. Initially hailed as a badly needed break from the normally cloudy, dampness, by August the heat wave was declared a drought, "...water was rationed, crops were failing, and Hyde Park's grass burned into a delicate shade of raw sienna. ...the excessive heat was threatening the very structure of the nation's

⁷⁰ Street, John. Rebel Rock: The Politics of Popular Music, page 24-25.

houses.”⁷¹ The Notting Hill Carnival and the Caribbean Festival, usually racially harmonious celebrations, both suddenly erupted with clashes between Black youths and the police. Fear of the “ghetto-culture” began to rise among the country’s whites, and the growing heat and poverty only added to the hysteria. It was under these apocalyptic conditions and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s inability to deal with them that a new youth counterculture began to emerge on King’s Row in London.⁷² Combining the elements of a number of post-war working class youth cultures before it, Punk made its debut in the music press that summer, and it remained a “highly photogenic phenomenon”⁷³ throughout 1978, providing the tabloid press with sensational (although often distorted) stories epitomizing the repercussions of poverty and uncertainty on the nation’s youth.

The widespread unemployment and poor social conditions in England provoked angry feelings and rage that were expressed by working class youth of the time in a general rejection of conformity and normative values through their music and petty crime.⁷⁴ “Apocalypse was in the air and the

⁷¹ Hebdidge, Dick. Subculture: The Meaning of Style, page 24.

⁷² *Ibid.*, pages 24-25.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, page 26.

⁷⁴ O’Hara, Craig. The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!, pages 26-27.

rhetoric of Punk was drenched in apocalypse: in the stock imagery of crisis and sudden change."⁷⁵ In Break All Rules!, Tricia Henry says:

To ignore the obvious connections between the Punk phenomenon and economic and social inequalities in Great Britain would be to deny the validity of the philosophical underpinnings of the movement. Punk in Britain was essentially a movement consisting of underprivileged working-class white youths. Many of them felt their social situation deeply and used the medium of Punk to express their dissatisfaction.⁷⁶

American Left Re-Emerged?

While the general political philosophy of Punk was being worked out on the streets of London, it cannot be overlooked that the American proto-Punk bands were highly influential on the early British Punks. Many of these proto-Punk bands — Iggy (Pop) and the Stooges, the Ramones, Richard Hell, Patti Smyth, etc. — fused avant-garde literary, cinematic and artistic influences with their music, their fashion, their scene.⁷⁷ New York began to fill with these youth, many of whom were art school dropouts or alienated suburbanites. They congregated in places like CBGBs, an underground club known for discovering the likes of the Talking Heads and the Ramones.

Where the British Punks were born out of poverty like the Old Left, American Punk was born from the estrangement and disaffection youth felt in the presence of the New Left's selling out and becoming yuppies. They

⁷⁵ Hebdidge, Dick. Subculture: The Meaning of Style, page 27.

⁷⁶ Henry, Tricia. Break All Rules!, page 67.

⁷⁷ Hebdidge, Dick. Subculture: The Meaning of Style, page 27.

had been let down by the generation before them, and now they were doing the same to the next generation. While Punk politically solidified in England, the political environment in the United States gave rise to the political awareness of the proto-Punk bohemians. The post war pop culture and consumerism had not made life better for young Americans. And while John Patrick Diggins proclaims that the American Left died in the late '70s in The Rise and Fall of the American Left, like so many others, he failed to recognize the political significance of the Punk movement.⁷⁸ While Diggins asserts that most youth in the early '80s supported President Ronald Reagan, it was at this same time that American Punk came of age and began to question government policies. The massive apathy left in the wake of the Vietnam War, the oil crisis and welfare reform were just the beginning of American Punk's awakening.

Called "Hardcore," early American Punk was full of disaffected middle class youth beginning around 1980, mainly in urban centers like Washington, D.C., New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles. In American Hardcore: A Tribal History, Steven Blush describes the scene:

Hardcore was more than music — it became a political and social movement as well. The participants constituted a tribe unto themselves. Some of them were alienated or abused, and found escape in the hard-edged music. Some saw a better world or a

⁷⁸ Diggins, John Patrick. The Rise and Fall of the American Left, pages 279-306.

tearing down of the status quo, and were angry. Most of them simply wanted to raise hell. Stark and uncompromising, hardcore generated a lifestyle stripped down to the bare bones. Its intensity exposed raw nerves. Everyone was edgy and aggressive.⁷⁹

The Dead Kennedys, symbolically named for the death of America's last hope in the Kennedy family, are "arguably the most ideologically



important band in the history of American Punk politics," according to Daniel Sinker,⁸⁰ because they injected transformative political ideology into the otherwise nihilistic Hardcore scene of the early 1980s. The Dead Kennedys singer, Jello Biafra, rejected leftist dogma, embraced irony, questioned cultural and political orthodoxies and encouraged Punks to think for

Figure 2.6 Jello Biafra of the Dead Kennedys

⁷⁹ Blush, Steven. American Hardcore: A Tribal History, page 9.

⁸⁰ Sinker, Daniel. We Owe You Nothing — Punk Planet: The Collected Interviews, page 33.

themselves, rather than falling to thoughtless leftist moral dicta.

To put it simply, the Dead Kennedys were responsible for injecting real leftist politics into the American Punk culture, something that has never been repeated with the same degree of urgency and intelligence as the DKs attached to it.⁸¹

The American and British Punk scenes slowly became aware of their counterparts, and the music, style and philosophies of each group were adopted and incorporated by the other. Most notably, the very nature of the Punk philosophy enabled (and perhaps demanded) the movement's adaptability, enabling it to evolve over time. Punk evolved to incorporate new generations' issues, making it a considerably enduring counterculture of modern times, still appealing to disaffected youth the world over more than 25 years later. Its ability to maintain a sizable and devout following can be largely credited to things characteristic of the leftist countercultures before it. The centrality of art, music and personal expression, the foundational population of youth, the endurance of anti-establishment fervor, the underground origins, and the self-reflective tendency to draw on ideas and inspirations of other leftist genres are integral, not only to Punk's, but to all leftist countercultures' political philosophies and longevity.

⁸¹ Sinker, Daniel. We Owe You Nothing — Punk Planet: The Collected Interviews, page 33.

CHAPTER 3

THE POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY OF PUNK

What is Punk?

"The thing I really like about Punk is that anything anybody writes about it is wrong."⁸²

Writing the introduction to Craig O'Hara's book The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!, Marc Bayard similarly explains:

The major problem trying to explain Punk is that it is not something that fits neatly into a box or categories. Not surprising as Punk had made the explicit aim of trying to destroy all boxes and labels. With that major hurdle, any project that tries to define Punk or explain it must do so with very broad brush strokes.⁸³

While Punk emerged in the late 1970s as a reaction to the political environment of the time, it has remained elusive to academic explanations, models and theories. Punk, it turns out, is just not that simple. Partly because the counterculture synthesized aspects of so many of its predecessors, and partly because of its emphasis on independent thinking and subversion, Punk has always been characterized by a sort of lack of

⁸² Davies, Jude. "The Future of 'No Future': Punk Rock and Postmodern Theory." Journal of Popular Culture, page 3.

⁸³ O'Hara, Craig. The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!. introduction by Marc Bayard, page 11.

cohesion in its resistance to establish rules and stereotypes for itself. Many Punks would argue that if it can be neatly explained, it isn't Punk — an obvious alignment with postmodern theory.

“For both Punk and postmodern critical discourses, communication and politics are similarly problematical through their grounding in notions of constituency and consensus which have themselves become unstable,” says Davies.⁸⁴ He explains that Punks can be seen as postmodernists because they were always keenly aware of the danger of cooptation by a following that fails to understand the political significance of the movement. Many Punk activists feared that the moment the community became solidly definable, it risked being swept up and co-opted by consumerism and its pop fashion trends, which would ultimately destroy its subversion. Even within the community, bands that became moderately successful and accessible to the mainstream were ostracized and rejected as “sell outs” by the counterculture. According to Davies, this is “because of the Punks’ strong sense of recuperation of message by the market, a view of the ‘stars’ as more or less problematically related to the ‘real Punks,’ the unknowns and the underground who sustain a politically active and subversive

⁸⁴ Davies, Jude. “The Future of ‘No Future’: Punk Rock and Postmodern Theory.” Journal of Popular Culture, page 5.

tendency to this day."⁸⁵ Larry Zbach similarly wrote in the zine *Maximum Rock'n'Roll*:

Repeated media distortion, exaggeration, and stereotyping help to create a type of 'Punk' who has no idea of the conceptions, political and social philosophies, and diversity of the Punk movement. This type of 'Punk' will join the Punk movement in increasing numbers. As they join, the media frame will literally come true. The moral authorities will be proved right and the appropriate actions, which the societal control culture deems necessary to deal with the problem, will be legitimized. The potential for destroying or compromising the Punk movement will be great.⁸⁶

It can be argued that this keen sense of self-consciousness is the very thing that has allowed Punk to continuously evolve and adapt, making it one of the most enduring countercultures of the century. "Punk cut through the commodity spectacle...its ability to escape recuperation depended on its lack of content: it's lack of analysis, program, polemic."⁸⁷

"The closeness of Punk to academic theories of the postmodern is found in two main areas: its problematizing of community and its awareness of recuperation even when articulating its most radical political message,"⁸⁸ says Davies. And it is because of these two very things that Punk is so difficult to adequately or accurately describe. While Davies admits "Punk

⁸⁵ Davies, Jude. "The Future of 'No Future': Punk Rock and Postmodern Theory." *Journal of Popular Culture*, page 4.

⁸⁶ Zbach, Larry. "Untitled column." *Maximum Rock'n'Roll*.

⁸⁷ Davies, Jude. "The Future of 'No Future': Punk Rock and Postmodern Theory." *Journal of Popular Culture*, page 14.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, page 5.

presented itself as an oppositional tendency, with a network of resistances to authority, to work, to conventional politics," he also acknowledges that it was much more than that. Punk is a community that forced its participants to think for themselves and to construct their own positions for the very survival of the group. Because each individual carries the burden of defining how the personal is political within the context of the Punk community, the answers vary all over the spectrum.

Daniel Sinker puts it more plainly. When developing the concept for his zine, Punk Planet (an independently written and published mini-magazine of sorts), Sinker said he posted a message on an online Punk chat room, posing the question, "Why can't we do this?" He says that everyone interviewed in the zine has asked his or her own version of that question countless times:

Because if you boil Punk down and remove all the hair dye, power chords, typewriters, colored vinyl, leather jackets, glue sticks, show fliers, and combat boots, that question is what's left at the bottom of the pot. Punk has always been about asking 'why' and then doing something about it.⁸⁹

Sinker said the question applies to every aspect of Punks' lives, from asking why they can't play guitar, to why their opinions don't count, to why the world is such a mess, and most importantly, to looking inward and asking why they

⁸⁹ Sinker, Daniel. We Owe You Nothing — Punk Planet: The Collected Interviews, page 10.

aren't doing something about it. And he says, "The answers to those questions have created an entire culture, built by Punks from the ground up."⁹⁰ And while that culture has fantastically avoided sweeping assumptions about its political stance, it does have some common themes. The themes are generally adhered to as only broadly directional, a point from which each person makes their own way, and from which there are many exceptions to the rule — because after all, that's what makes it Punk.

Anti-Authority, Anti-Establishment, Non-Conformists

On the most basic level, most Punks agree that the most unifying principle adhered to as a group is a healthy distrust and/or dislike of authority, establishment and conformity. This is generally true of all countercultural movements, going back to the idea that countercultural movements come about from a feeling of being let down by the generation before them and the establishment they've created. This is probably one of the reasons that Punk has always been brushed off as teenage rebellion and angst. And in all fairness, it usually starts out that way.

In listening to the lyrics of Punk music, reading Punk zines and talking to Punks themselves, the overwhelming majority initially discovered Punk because they were ostracized from their peer groups at an early age. Punks

⁹⁰ Sinker, Daniel. We Owe You Nothing — Punk Planet: The Collected Interviews, page 10.

are the kids that got picked on in school for being different, for being poor, for not wearing the fashionable clothing of the day, for not listening to the latest music, for not believing in the normative values that surrounded them. They are the kids who questioned their teachers and their parents, and usually got in trouble for their independent thought. Many were labeled "nerds," "geeks" or "freaks" by their classmates, and many were angry and resentful of it. Those who were lucky enough to find Punk took solace listening to the lyrics of Punk singers who felt the same way, reading the zines of other outcasts, and generally discovering a group of like-minded individuals who were going through similar difficulties. The underlying message was clear — you shouldn't have to change your beliefs just to fit into someone else's world.

"Punks have built their platforms or messages with the advocacy and admittance of nonconformity. Conformity is rejected on every front possible in order to seek the truth, or sometime merely to shock people," says Craig O'Hara.⁹¹ Shock value seems to have been adopted by the Punks as a way of getting back at the society that had rejected them, by forcing people to see things from Punks' perspective and thus question their normative values and judgments. It is an outward and hostile rejection of conformity. In The Social Animal, sociologist Elliot Aronson says that conformity is "a change

⁹¹ O'Hara, Craig. The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!, page 27.

in a person's behavior or opinions as a result of real or imagined pressure from a person a group of people...that results from the observation of others for the purpose of gaining information about *proper* behavior."⁹² It is precisely this kind of normalizing of "proper" behavior that Punk philosophy rejects.

The fact that Punks look different is merely an exaggeration of what they had already been told by society – that they didn't fit in. The real essence of their nonconformity, according to O'Hara, is projected in their "questioning the prevailing modes of thought. Questions about things that others take for granted related to work, race, sex, and our own selves are not asked by the conformist whose ideas are determined by those around her. The nonconformist does not rely on others to determine her own reality."⁹³

As a result of their questioning the status quo, O'Hara says that our scapegoating doublethink society has labeled Punks as "deviants," while conformists are seen as "team players," resulting in the negative portrayal and media misrepresentations of the Punk movement.⁹⁴

The questions raised by nonconformists challenge the socialization process that is instituted to maintain power structures, which in turn raises

⁹² Aronson, Elliot. The Social Animal, page 16.

⁹³ O'Hara, Craig. The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!, pages 27-28.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, page 28.

questions about the legitimacy of authority and its establishment. "Punks do not have a great deal of respect for authority of any kind," O'Hara puts it modestly. "In general, forced authority has been looked at as a great evil causing agent. From the German Nazis in World War II, to the subjects of Stanley Milgram's shock experiments, to today's police force, it has been proven that unjustified obedience to authority has resulted in mass acceptance of harmful actions."⁹⁵

Instead, Punks tend to see themselves as outsiders looking in on and challenging society and its normative standards. A columnist for the zine, Profane Existence, says:

We are the inheritors of the white supremacist, patriarchal, capitalist world order. A prime position as defenders of the capital of the ruling class and the overseers of the underclass has been set aside for us by our parents, our upbringing, our culture, our history, and yet we have the moral gumption to reject it. As Punks, we reject our inherited race and class positions because we know they are bullshit.⁹⁶

Dick Lucas, the singer of the legendary Punk bands Subhumans and Citizen Fish explains how he feels about conformity and authority:

⁹⁵ O'Hara, Craig. The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!, page 28.

⁹⁶ Joel. "Untitled column." Profane Existence #13.

I have never come to terms with the idea that I am 'part of society' and should construct my actions to suit the prevailing moods of conformity, acceptance and achievement. Closed by the rigorous mind training of school and media, the mass mentality of Western culture revolves around upholding the past to attempt to secure the future, whilst suffering the present as beyond its control, 'safe' in the hands of government who feed the present to the masses as a byproduct of technological/material/industrial progress.⁹⁷



Figure 3.1 Dick Lucas of the Subhumans

This quote illustrates the interrelatedness of Punks' line of questioning — that personal rebellion leads to political resistance, that the personal is political, that questioning conformity leads to challenging the establishment systems that promote it, and once one recognizes the authorities' power-maintenance structures, the next logical subject of attack becomes the government...

⁹⁷ Sprouse, Martin. Threat By Example, page 13.

Anarchism

While many Punks are content to question normative values on a personal or social level, it remains true that because of its anti-authoritarian, anti-establishment stance, it's only natural for many Punks to go on to question the government.



Figure 3.2 Anarchist clothing patch

And while some Punks contain their questioning to particular governmental policies and practices, still others find themselves questioning the legitimacy of and/or the need for government at all. In a letter to Profane Existence, Punks of the Anarchist Youth Federation said:

All government is undesirable and unnecessary. There are no services provided by the state that the community could not provide itself. We don't need anyone telling us what to do, trying to run our lives, harassing us with taxes, rules, regulations, and living high on the hog off our labor.⁹⁸

Like the anarchists of the early 1900s, most Punks see anarchism as an alternative to failed existing systems, an alternative that would provide

⁹⁸ Anarchist Youth Federation. "Untitled column." Profane Existence #5, page 38.

true freedom, value nonconformity and diversity, and promote communal peace. In his book The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!, Craig O'Hara devotes an entire chapter to anarchism:

Punks are primarily anarchists. There are few who promote the continuation of any form of capitalism or communism. This is not



to say that all Punks are well read in the history and theory of anarchism, but most do share a belief around the anarchist principles of having no official government rulers, and valuing individual freedom and responsibility (who doesn't).⁹⁹

Figure 3.3 Punk grrl shows off her anarchist graffiti

As noted here, Punks are not generally supportive of the Old American Lefts' support of communism and/ or socialism. "Unlike other youth or bourgeois countercultures, Punks reject communism and the left wing of the traditional democratic governments as well as capitalism," says O'Hara.¹⁰⁰ However, he also admits that Punks have cooperated with communist and other leftist groups on a regular basis when their goals supported similar

⁹⁹ O'Hara, Craig. The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!, page 71.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., page 72.

interests, such as women's rights, working class interests and a general distaste for capitalism.¹⁰¹

To understand Punk's anarchist beginnings, one only needs to open up any number of the records released by the English band Crass. Crass was a group of 12 people who lived together communally, formed a band, created films, newspapers, posters, and formed a record label.



Figure 3.4 Crass artwork by Gee Vaucher

The band formed in 1978 as a reaction to the increasing acceptance and fashionableness of Punk in England. "Only with respect to their views on pacifism have some anarchist Punks renounced them as a major reference point for the Punk anarchist ideal," says O'Hara.¹⁰²

Punks do not believe that anarchy simply means no laws and accepting the ensuing mass chaos that would result. Rather, many Punks

¹⁰¹ O'Hara, Craig. The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!, page 72.

¹⁰² Ibid., page 83.

believe that over time a gradual change in the personal responsibility of each individual would replace the need for laws.



Figure 3.5 Anarchist clothing patch

"Anarchy could only be achieved gradually through people changing themselves — and then others by persuasion [not coercion]. You cannot force anarchy on people," Scottish Punk band Oi Polloi said. "Anarchy could only be reality if people controlled themselves — it's about responsibility, being a law unto yourself. Anarchy can only exist when people begin to act responsibly."¹⁰³ Punks acknowledge that if all governments disappeared or were suddenly forcibly removed, people today would riot, murder and destroy each other, probably more than they already do. But the possibility that we can all learn to become more responsible and live together peacefully drives the continued belief in anarchism. "When individuals can live in peace without authorities to compel or punish them, when people have enough courage to speak honestly and equally with each other, then

¹⁰³ Oi Polloi. "Untitled interview." Maximum Rock'n'Roll #25.

and only then will anarchy be possible," says O'Hara, outlining the need for Punks to live by example without becoming elitist leaders.¹⁰⁴

Other early Punk bands like Political Asylum and Chumbawamba have injected anarchist philosophy into their lyrics, but Punks also look to anarchist writers like Emma Goldman, Peter Kropotkin and Noam Chomsky for inspiration. In order to believe that anarchism could actually exist peacefully, without having to force it on others, Punks must assume that humans are capable of and want change in the form of relief of oppression. "If the case were otherwise, the anarchist would be forcing the very same manner of conditioning he despises," says O'Hara.¹⁰⁵

Going back again to the challenging of normative values and power structures, New York Punk band APPLE says people "are conditioned by society to exploit one another and this is necessary for the system to operate." But if that conditioning was removed, "Surely, if a child was exposed to good pacifistic, humanitarian ideas as opposed to those the child now encounters on a daily basis, it would have a totally different attitude towards society and the world as a whole," enabling anarchism to become a valid, widespread reality.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ O'Hara, Craig. The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!, page 97.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., page 84.

¹⁰⁶ APPLE, "Untitled interview." Maximum Rock'nRoll #48.

Still, the reality exists that many Punk anarchists are “content to stay within their own circle and have rejected the possibility of widespread anarchy. This attitude can be interpreted as a ‘personal’ or ‘lifestyle’ anarchy.”¹⁰⁷ While many anarchists would say this resignation to the belief that other people are not capable of ruling themselves is the height of bourgeois thinking, it does exist among the Punk nihilists. And there are other Punks who have adopted a more reformist approach, supporting the Green Party, socialist movements and indigenous peoples’ governing



structures. Some Punk anarchists have even cried out that if the revolution isn’t coming tomorrow, they should move toward something better (i.e., less oppressive) today. Among all these Punk factions, little has been agreed to in terms of means, and the violence versus pacifism debate still rages on in the Punk community, as we will see later. What unites all of them is the search for a world in which people can coexist without

Figure 3.6 Kathleen Hanna of Bikini Kill

¹⁰⁷ O’Hara, Craig. The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!, page 87.

oppressing one another. In the words of Punk band Bikini Kill's singer, Kathleen Hanna, "I think it's a joyous thing to fight back against oppression. I think it's all about saying, 'I love life.'"¹⁰⁸

Do It Yourself Ethic

Owing a large debt to the anarchist credo of personal responsibility, Punk's driving force is its "Do It Yourself" ethic. More commonly just called "DIY," it is an underlying theme throughout the community. "The ethos of Punk business has been 'do it yourself.' This is an extension of the anarchist principles requiring responsibility and cooperation in order to build a more productive, creative and enjoyable future," says O'Hara. The DIY ethic is the empowering belief held by Punks that they can do whatever it is they set out to achieve, and moreover that they *should* do it on their own, rather than relying on "the system" to supply it for them.

[DIY is] taken as a given in Punk rock, but it's the foundation the entire culture is built upon. Punk writers aren't sitting at home hoping they'll get published, they're publishing it themselves; fans aren't waiting around hoping for someone to put out a record by their favorite band, they're releasing it themselves; we're not waiting for a club to open up that will book shows that cater to the under-21 set, we're opening them ourselves. Punk has never waited for the OK from anyone to step out on its own.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Sinker, Daniel. We Owe You Nothing — Punk Planet: The Collected Interviews, page 69.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., page 11.

The DIY ethic is personally empowering in its ability to take the power back from the authoritarian establishment and put it in the hands of the people. Martin Sorrondéguy, the singer of Chicago Punk band Los Crudos, explains what DIY meant for him and his band:



I think out of everything we've accomplished...the most significant is proving that you can do things independently: you don't have to sit around at home waiting for that million dollar call to take you somewhere or tell you you're OK now. We said, 'Fuck you, we don't need anybody to tell us we're OK,' and we did what we wanted to do. I think a lot of young people see us as an example now. ... I think everything we do revolves around a hands-on, totally involved DIY thing...We are basically saying that we want to have total control over what we do.¹¹⁰

Figure 3.7 Martin Sorrondéguy of Los Crudos

¹¹⁰Sinker, Daniel. We Owe You Nothing — Punk Planet: The Collected Interviews, pages 209-210.

Furthermore, in an interview with Punk Planet, Dead Kennedys' singer Jello Biafra explained that the DIY philosophy is about finding out who you really are, what you stand for and what you can do to change things:

Writing the name of a British Punk band that broke up 15 years ago on the back of the jacket you bought at the mall does not make you radical...I think that being radical means interacting with a lot of different kinds of people and making up your own mind about where you fit in and what you want to do... You have to identify what you as an individual can do: What are your skills? How do they fit in?¹¹¹

The DIY ethic also promotes the political idea that if you don't like something, you have the power to change it. In this way, it encourages activism and has led to the creation of an entire political-economic network within the Punk scene, which will be described in more detail later. The important thing to note here is that the DIY ethic has empowered Punks to go forward and do things they are constantly being told by society that they cannot do on their own.

The driving ethic behind most sincere Punk efforts is DIY — Do It Yourself. We don't need to rely on rich businessmen to organize our fun for their profit — we can do it ourselves for no profit. We Punks can organize gigs, organize and attend demonstrations, put out records, publish books and fanzines, set up mail order distributions for our products, run record stores, distribute literature, encourage boycotts and participate in political activities.

¹¹¹ Sinker, Daniel. We Owe You Nothing — Punk Planet: The Collected Interviews, page 45.

We do all of these things and we do them well. Can any other youth-based counterculture...claim so much?¹¹²

Youth

The discussion of youth involvement is conspicuously missing from most writing on the Punk movement. Either because it is taken for granted or because the authors have since 'grown up,' the youth element of Punk isn't discussed much in the literature available on the subject. And yet it remains an integral component, both in the population of the community and in the values that youth embody. It is roundly agreed upon that Punk was and is primarily a youth movement. And as I discussed before, most Punks discover the community in their teenage years and find comfort in knowing there are other people who share their nonconformist values. This is partially because it is essential to the political philosophy of Punk that youth be respected and treated as complete human beings. Unlike the ageist establishments most youth encounter in their homes and schools, Punks take kids seriously. Punks recognize that many revolutionary and radical ideas come from youth because they haven't yet been completely socialized to accept oppression. It is this spirit that is so commonly misidentified as mere teen angst and rebelliousness.

¹¹² Joel. "Untitled column." Profane Existence #11/12, page 10.



Figure 3.8 Punk youth

As a community, Punk gives youth a voice that they are denied elsewhere. They learn the DIY ethic that teaches them they can, as opposed to society's constantly telling them they can't. Of the hundreds of Punk zines and bands that exist, a great majority of them are created by youth. Where a 16-year-old would have a hard time getting published in a local newspaper or

magazine, Punk tells them that they can create their own zine, and moreover, say whatever they want in it. While in recent years, the Internet has afforded youth the opportunity to voice their opinions, publishing their own zine still continues to give them legitimacy. It is also the DIY ethic that teaches youth they can start their own bands, even if their musicianship isn't developed enough for radio play. Again, the Internet has broadened the ability of 'amateurs' to post their MP3s online, circumventing major record labels. But it cannot be denied that Punk's political-philosophy has provided many youth with the encouragement and empowerment needed at this self-conscious age.

One such contribution of youth to the Punk scene is the "all ages" credo. Tired of being left out of shows because they weren't old enough to get into the bars their favorite bands were playing at, Punk youth began to demand that Punk bands stick to their ideal of accessibility and extend the idea to people under the drinking age of 21. Many bands and even independent record labels rallied around the idea that the under 21 crowd shouldn't be shut out of shows. As a result, many Punk bands today make it a point to play "all ages" shows, so that their biggest fans can see them. "Local Punk scenes quickly became more youth oriented and took their shows away from clubs and bars, which depended on alcohol sales, to rented out fire halls and V.F.W. posts," O'Hara says.¹¹³ Carrie Brownstein, singer of Sleater-Kinney, says, "All ages shows are important to us. When we play 18-and-over shows, it's usually not as fun as all ages shows. We really like to have the energy of the younger kids..."¹¹⁴ Youth have continued to redefine Punk in terms of its aesthetic, its sound and its values over the past 25 years, and with each new teenager comes a reinvigoration of the Punk community with new energy, ideas and ideals.

¹¹³ O'Hara, Craig. The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!, pages 142-144.

¹¹⁴ Sinker, Daniel. We Owe You Nothing — Punk Planet: The Collected Interviews, page 102.

Aesthetics

Like so many other things in Punk, the aesthetic most people commonly attribute to the counterculture is too narrowly defined to be accurate. The spiky-haired, pimple-faced teenage Caucasian male with a ripped T-shirt, leather jacket, studded belt, bondage pants and dog chain around his neck



Figure 3.9 Typical Punk aesthetic

isn't totally off base, but it also isn't representative. In fact, because "Punk reproduced the entire sartorial history of post-war working-class youth cultures in 'cut up' form, combining elements which had originally belonged to completely different epochs,"¹¹⁵ it would be extremely difficult to nail down just one representative aesthetic. Additionally, the varied values and politics of Punks also contribute to the difficulty in pinning down a single aesthetic, as different individuals with varying backgrounds and degrees of political interest would likely use fashion to voice their divergent concerns in

¹¹⁵ Hebdidge, Dick. Subculture: The Meaning of Style, page 26.

particularly unique ways. As Dick Hebdidge puts it, "Style in subculture is...pregnant with significance."¹¹⁶

In his hugely successful book Subculture: The Meaning of Style, Hebdidge says, "The Punk aesthetic, formulated in the widening gap between artist and audience, can be read as an attempt to expose glam rock's implicit contradictions."¹¹⁷ When Punk emerged in the late 1970s, it was intent on dethroning the rock superstars of the day, and subsequently tearing down the huge gap between the 'artist' or 'performer' and the massive crowd of alienated onlookers. "The 'working classness,' the scruffiness and earthiness of Punk ran directly counter to the arrogance, elegance and verbosity of the glam rock superstars," Hebdidge said, adding that this didn't prevent Punk from picking up on certain aspects of the glam rockers:

Punk claimed to speak for the neglected constituency of white lumpen youth, but it did so typically in the stilted language of glam and glitter rock — 'rendering' working classness metaphorically in chains and hollow cheeks, 'dirty' clothing (stained jackets, tarty see-through blouses) and rough and ready diction. Resorting to parody, the blank generation...described itself in bondage through an assortment of darkly comic signifiers — straps and chains, strait jackets and rigid postures. Despite its proletarian accents, Punk's rhetoric was steeped in irony...[its] guttersnipe rhetoric, its obsession with class and relevance were expressly designed to

¹¹⁶ Hebdidge, Dick. Subculture: The Meaning of Style, page 18.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., page 63.

undercut the intellectual posturing of the previous generation of rock musicians.¹¹⁸

With Hebdidge's analysis in mind, it is easy to see why the aesthetic of Punk has changed so much over the years, remaining constant only in its challenging the norms of the day. If a particular style or hairdo is shocking to the masses, it's probably Punk, and if it challenges the status quo in a symbolic way, all the better. Punks have evolved to embrace a number of styles over the past 25 years, and here are just a few of them:

- **Hair:** Spiky, mohawks, fins, liberty spikes, horns; dyed brilliant colors or black; floppy and unkempt; dreadlocks; braids; shaved; devil lock (similar to a mohawk plastered forward over the forehead into a point between the eyes, popularized by the band the Misfits); etc.
- **Clothing:** Anything ripped, torn, tattered, or otherwise dirty and unkempt looking; patches (not necessarily to cover up holes, and often decorated with political and/or band slogans); bondage attire with zippers and straps, often found in fetish shops; leather jackets; band T-shirts; military uniforms; mismatched patterns and/or colors, such as stripes with plaids; anything black (but not too Goth); stretch jeans; fishnets (shirts or tights); skinny ties; etc.

¹¹⁸ Hebdidge, Dick. Subculture: The Meaning of Style, page 63.

- **Shoes:** Doc Martens, workman's or military combat boots; Vans or Converse tennis shoes; creepers (pointy-toed, witch- or elf-like shoes, often with very thick soles); oxfords (preferably two toned); mary janes (girls shoes with buckles); etc.
- **Accessories:** Studded and spiked leather or plastic jewelry and belts, often found in fetish shops; chains; safety pins; zippers; straps; piercings; tattoos; black makeup and nail polish; anything animal print, striped or plaid; anything leather, pleather (man made plastic/leather), net, mesh, or other odd textures; etc.

Ironically, as the Punks-of-yesterday's aesthetic is recuperated and co-opted by the mainstream, new Punks have often reverted to previous styles to maintain their assaulting appearances. Examples would include the adoption of the greaser look with leather jackets, white T-shirts and blue jeans; the adoption of the '70s rockers look (mostly among Punk offshoots Indie and Emo) with tight polyester clothing in earth tones, floppy hairdos and black thick-rimmed glasses; and the most recent return to the early '70s Punks' bondage pants, only this time instead of skin tight, they have been combined with the baggy pants look of Skaters, Hip-hop and Rappers. Again, the important element of Punk style is its subversion — and how that is rendered is entirely up to the unique individual.

Where Punks Stand on the Issues

Like other countercultures before it, Punk has also been full of efforts to organize (or in some cases disorganize) to create change. Known primarily for its power-chord driven, fast and aggressive music, Punk effectively utilizes song lyrics as one of many vehicles that help spread the political message, generating new interest and new ideas, as well as mobilizing the community behind a multitude of causes. Zines and artwork also serve as vehicles of communication and make up Punk's own political-economic network, which will be discussed in the next chapter. But while the mainstream has written Punk off as merely a teen fad or a musical genre, it is revealing to look into the causes those vehicles champion. Whether you believe that the music, zines and art generate Punks' politics, or that they are a reflection of them, they serve as a window into the causes that are the spirit of this vibrant counterculture.

Punks have created their own political groups among the community who have supported a number of important radical causes, organized their own rallies, protests and benefits, as well as joined with other radical communities. And while there are Punks who don't participate in political activism, as individuals Punks are usually quite politically aware because they are constantly surrounded by the political discourse and activism of their peers.

The political philosophies discussed earlier usually direct the stance Punks take on any number of political issues — usually aimed at destroying the oppression caused by the establishment — but as was also discussed, independent thought is highly valued and celebrated in the Punk community, and thus, Punks' interpret the issues in a variety of unique ways. Like any activist community, Punks often argue over what are the most important issues, over what the proposed solution(s) should be, over which other groups to work with, and have often been criticized for their lack of cohesion. But it is this pluralism that keeps Punk from becoming recuperated and co-opted into a pop fad — Punk's diversity of thought has helped make it difficult to package and sell as a consumer trend. While the '90s introduced political correctness, which was adopted by many politically active Punks, in its extreme self-righteousness, it caused other Punks to backlash with a slew of anti-P.C. politics, while others remained content to be 'armchair' activists. On the whole, Punks recognize the necessity of not only allowing or tolerating dissenting views, but of respecting them. This is readily evidenced in the variety of opinions and views shared in Punks' song lyrics or writings in zines. Creating any sort of moral dicta for all Punks to follow would be contributing to the very oppression Punks try so hard to fight.

Probably the most unifying aspect of Punks' political action is "The support of action over lobbying attempts [which] has a strong tradition in the

Punk movement. While Punks may not have the connections or resources to work with lawmakers, they often will try to change things themselves as directly as possible," says O'Hara. "Rhetoric...has inspired many Punks to not only act on their own, but to form their own groups...and educate others."¹¹⁹ Here are some of the causes Punks have taken on, and the various interpretations and actions Punks have contributed to them.

Violence vs. Pacifism

Every counterculture has had to ask itself whether violence should be a means to achieving its goals, or if it should instead pursue a pacifist course. In examining the American Left throughout the 1900s, it is easy to see that this issue has always been divisive to radical communities, and that remains the case for the Punk community. It has long been assumed that the aggressive nature of the Punk counterculture necessitated an acceptance or even desire for violent conflict, especially in light of the anarchist goal of overthrowing the government.

Punk has had its share of "Quincy Punks," named after the fashionable, violent characters portrayed on the '80s television show, who O'Hara argues joined the scene without any knowledge of its politics primarily due to media distortions and threatened to "make Punk a parody of

¹¹⁹ O'Hara, Craig. The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!, page 139.

itself."¹²⁰ These kids were primarily attracted to the Punk scene because of the violent images they saw in the press, and most quickly left when they discovered that wasn't what Punk was about.

From its inception, many Punk anarchists argued that violent revolution only led to the establishment of another oppressive regime. Along the same lines of Emma Goldman's saying "It's not my revolution if I can't dance to it," British Punk band Crass said, "I don't want your revolution, I want anarchy and peace." And thus began the development of "peace Punk." Anarchist Punks insisted "With the goals of no government or outside oppression, anarchist violence seems to be more out of tune with the stated objectives than any other political violence."¹²¹ Some Punks advanced pacifism as a valid strategy to resist the United States' invasion of Iraq. Then defunct British Punk band Crass' singer Steve Ignorant said, "As a pacifist I stand against organized militarism, believing that the use of power to control people is a violation of human dignity." However, even among the peace Punks, there was an exception to this rule. "If I were to find myself in a position where that power threatened to directly violate me, I would stand

¹²⁰ O'Hara, Craig. The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!, page 45.

¹²¹ Masson, Todd. "Untitled column." Profane Existence #5, page 11.

against it in whatever way was necessary to prevent it. In that situation, I do not rule out the possibility of force."¹²²

Peace Punks have found it overwhelmingly difficult to spread their views because it is so often used in resistance to what mainstream society sees as patriotic. On the Subhumans' EP "Rats," singer Dick Lucas says:



Figure 3.10 Punk wearing gas mask and swinging bat

The majority of people have such set beliefs that any open and determined pacifism is hysterically conceived as enemy infiltration, rather than as an extension of the obvious fact that War is Death is Wrong. Such basic fundamental logic is generally accepted as true but 'unrealistic' in a world of greed and paranoia where patriotism is second nature and survival is taken for granted...¹²³

But there are also those Punks who look to the confrontational approach of the '60s student movement, and the violent gun-toting, bomb-throwing of groups like the Black Panthers and the Weathermen for

¹²² O'Hara, Craig. The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!, pages 87-88.

¹²³ Subhumans. "Rats" EP. Bluurg Records, 1983.

inspiration. "The resurgence of material about the Red Army Faction, the Angry Brigade, the Weathermen, the Black Panthers, and other groups of people who chose armed struggle is continually reviewed in fanzines," says O'Hara. "With the spread of this literature, coupled with the popularity of the EZLN [Zapatista] struggle, more Punks are going against the ideology of pacifism. Hopefully those who choose other means of support in the worldwide struggle for freedom will be well prepared."¹²⁴

But O'Hara says that "the great difference in numbers and power the Punks and other counterculture freaks have to their respective governments" is an obvious reason for supporting non-violent resistance. "There is little good that can be done if imprisoned or dead."¹²⁵ Or as IN*CIT editor Todd Masson noted in a column in Profane Existence, "Playing with romantic notions of revolutionary violence tends to put people in the ground before their time, or at least in jail...even if most violence is self-defense. What do you hear from well armed, defensive Black Panthers as of late?"¹²⁶

Still, a number of Punk anarchists, even those who initially supported pacifism, have come to see pacifism as naïve and violence as necessary. "Unfortunately, the real world isn't based on moral premises. If politics and revolutionary change was just about morals, we'd have won centuries ago!

¹²⁴ O'Hara, Craig. The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!, page 92.

¹²⁵ Ibid., page 89.

¹²⁶ Masson, Todd. "Untitled column." Profane Existence #5, page 11.

— because in certain times and certain places we need to use violence,” said Political Asylum’s singer, Ramsey Kanaan.¹²⁷ The Profane Existence collective has often published “preparedness” information in their zine, and member Felix Havoc contributed a firearm primer called “Turn Up the Heat” in the collective’s book Making Punk a Threat Again.¹²⁸ Profane Existence’s editor, Dan, said:

I believe in the pacifist philosophy, but I can also say that I believe in a God but in real life I’d have a hard time proving that one exists! This is real life and there is very real violence in our society. By not being prepared to deal with it, mentally or physically, is a great risk to take.¹²⁹

“The idea that violent means are the only ones that get results is as dangerous as the ‘might makes right’ argument that anarchists so vehemently oppose,” argues O’Hara, and he reminds Punks that, “To hold pacifism as an admirable ideal, but useless because of its impracticality, is equivalent to the charges often leveled at anarchy.”¹³⁰ Put simply, “There are no set criteria given to determine when and to what ends violence would be acceptable,” among the Punk movement, O’Hara says.¹³¹ What is obvious is that by partaking in a detailed debate over violence versus

¹²⁷ Kanaan, Ramsey. “Political Asylum interview.” Maximum Rock’n’Roll #104.

¹²⁸ Havoc, Felix. “Turn Up the Heat.” Making Punk a Threat Again.

¹²⁹ Dan. “untitled column.” Profane Existence #5.

¹³⁰ O’Hara, Craig. The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!, page 92.

¹³¹ Ibid., page 90.

pacifism as a means to achieving change, Punk is clearly an oppositional political movement. By discussing how to affect change or oppose the status quo, Punks have cemented their overt activism.

Capitalism and Consumerism

"In the past, the American Left assumed that true freedom begins only when capitalism ends. Hence the Left was nothing if not anti-capitalist," explains Diggins. Like its American Left predecessors, Punks have been unified behind the goal of eliminating capitalism and the evils it causes. "However the new social order was envisioned, competitive individualism would be replaced by some version of the cooperative ideal in which human beings, freed from the economic necessity of engaging in coerced labor, would realize their full nature in creative work."¹³² While Punk anarchists would not promote a "new social order" as part of the solution, most Punks (especially anarchists) support the ideal of destroying the bondage of capitalism. And while critiques of capitalism have not been unique to the Left, Punk has adopted much of its discourse on capitalism from the early Lefts.

¹³² Diggins, John Patrick. The Rise and Fall of the American Left, page 34.

The American Left originally rose out of the ideas of Transcendental thinkers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau who "cursed the 'corpse-cold' nature of institutions and protested a society in which 'man is thus metamorphosed into a thing.'" The Old Left had grown out of an abundance of poverty during the Depression, much like



Figure 3.11 Anti-capitalist clothing patch

British Punk, and the New Left grew out of a poverty of abundance and consumerism, much like American Punk. Diggins says, "Jaded by affluence, estranged by parents who so valued this affluence, young radicals began to sense that their middle-class alienation had something in common with lower-class exploitation," in the early '60s.¹³³ Growing out of extreme poverty in England, and extreme consumerism in the United States, Punks on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean condemned capitalism as oppressive and alienating.

¹³³ Diggins, John Patrick. The Rise and Fall of the American Left, page 220.

Punk's initial attack on glam rock was largely based on disgust with masses of youth consumers pouring into arenas like zombies, utterly dependent on the gap between them and their superstar idols. In the book Working Class Youth Culture, Ian Taylor and Dave Wall describe the perception of glam rock by working class kids:

Bowie has in effect colluded in consumer capitalism's attempt to recreate a dependent adolescent class, involved as passive teenage consumers in the purchase of leisure prior to the assumption of 'adulthood' rather than being a youth culture of persons who question (from whatever class or cultural perspective) the value and meaning of adolescence and the transition to the adult world of work.¹³⁴

Glam rock reproduced capitalist tendencies with its high priced albums, concerts and aesthetic. Punk, on the other hand, provided a critique of the capitalist forces that had so many kids ignoring the lurking reality that awaited them upon entering adulthood — a life of work for someone else's benefit. Moreover, Punks in England saw capitalism as the cause of their poverty, and Punks in America saw it as the cause of their alienation. Going back again to anarchist ideals, most Punks believed that the removal of the capitalist state would ensure cooperative equality for all people, not just the few at the top.

¹³⁴ Taylor, Ian, and Dave Wall. "Beyond the Skinheads." Working Class Youth Culture.

Punks have achieved this subversion of capitalism in their own communities by hosting small, affordable shows, by dissolving the boundaries between the audience and the performer, by limiting the sale price of their albums, and other political economic networks described in more detail later.

In a Punk Planet interview, Bikini Kill's singer Kathleen Hanna asks:



Figure 3.12 Anti-capitalist Punk art

Why are we allowing capitalist thought to define everything? Why does that get to decide how everything goes down? And why is it about being legitimate in the eyes of the people who own the majority of the wealth? Why do they get to decide these things? It's like everybody's still trying to be accepted in the eyes of their fathers. We're all fighting for the crumbs on The Man's table and people always get pitted in opposition to each other... We need to realize that while we're squabbling, shit is going down. The U.S. government is going to all these other countries and fucking over people's governments and people's lives and jobs and stealing natural resources.¹³⁵

Punks have sought to escape what they see as the inevitable slavery of work to instead pursue more creative (and productive) endeavors. They have sought to escape the alienation of consumerism by engaging in

¹³⁵ Sinker, Daniel. We Owe You Nothing — Punk Planet: The Collected Interviews, page 70.

cooperative activities that would develop synergistic bonds between people, rather than competition. Punks have demanded through their symbolic aesthetic and their overt actions that blind consumers open their eyes to the oppression and bondage their superfluous lifestyles create for working class people everywhere. Punks have attempted to reveal the injustices and atrocities committed throughout the world in the name of capitalist "development" and "advancement." Punks have rejected capitalism's definitions of success and achievement, and created their own meanings. Anti-capitalism isn't just an underlying theme in Punk — it's overarching.

These anti-capitalist goals are evidenced in the music, writings and aesthetic of Punks, but also in the political economy they've created in its stead (to be discussed in the next chapter) and in their involvement with protests of NAFTA and World Trade Organization protests in Seattle and Washington, D.C. Punks have consistently voiced their opposition to the oppression caused by global capitalist endeavors, as well as opposing the wrongs of capitalism on a local basis, within the context of class, poverty and homelessness, as I will discuss later.

War

A number of the philosophies already discussed contribute to Punks' opposition to war. Punk anarchists disagree with the imperialist goals of war, and also see it as the illegitimate use of force to control someone else. Punk pacifists see it as violent coercion. And the reality that many (if not most) wars are fought over resources doesn't gel well with Punks' hatred of capitalism, either. Punks' reasons for opposing war are many and diverse, as they are among most people. But they do correlate with the basic political philosophies most Punks adhere to, such as anti-authority, anti-establishment, anarchist, anti-capitalism and pacifist.



Figure 3.13 Punks participating in a war protest

Punks have contributed significantly to opposition efforts through a discourse on the economic aspects of war. From popularizing the "no blood for oil" slogan to (former Dead Kennedys singer) Jello Biafra's spoken word critique "Die for oil, sucker," Punks acknowledge that much of what drives war is profits. Craig O'Hara says that Operation

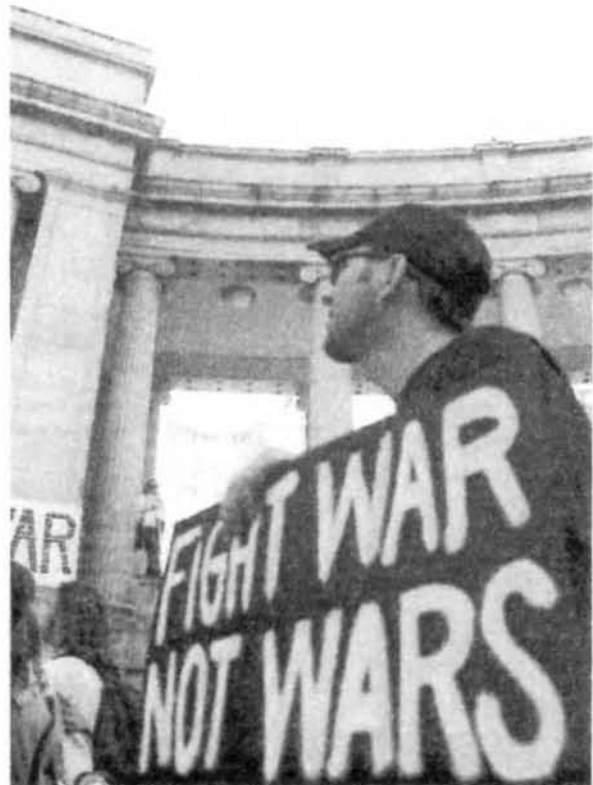


Figure 3.14 Punk carrying sign with anti-war slogan used by Crass
Desert Storm and the Gulf War not only protected the interests and profits of oil companies, but they also generated economic results by cashing in on the consumption of T-shirts, videos, television specials and bumper stickers; and the rebuilding efforts after the war promised corporate construction companies profitable contracts as well.¹³⁶

Punks also have made their opposition to war well known by participating in anti-war protests the world over. The anti-war sentiment is heard in lyrics, such as Crass' chanting "Fight war, not wars," as well as in

¹³⁶ O'Hara, Craig. The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!, page 77.

Punk zines. Dozens of Punk bands have played in anti-war concerts that often serve as benefits to raise funds for anti-war organizations.

Punk Planet scrapped its planned cover story in December of 1998 to run an interview with Chicago-area Punks Jeff Guntzel, Kathy Kelly and Michael Bremer about their involvement with a group called Voices in the Wilderness. The group, a humanitarian organization, defied U.S. embargoes by taking medicine and supplies to Iraq during the Gulf War in an effort to end sanctions. The U.S. Justice Department threatened to fine the group

\$100,000. Though Punk Planet

had begun as a music review

zine, this story, "The Murder of Iraq," generated more mail than any story the zine had ever run.

"It sparked movement within the Punk scene to work towards ending the sanctions," said editor Daniel Sinker. "To this day, benefit shows and fanzine articles



Figure 3.15 Punk protesting war

continue to support the cause."¹³⁷

Earlier that same year, in February 1998, a Punk by the name of Jon Strange had dressed up in a suit and tie to get into a CNN town meeting at Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio, where Secretary of State Madeline Albright, Defense Secretary William Cohen and National Security Advisor Sandy Berger would answer questions about the brewing war with Iraq. The town meeting was televised live, and from the beginning, groups of protestors could be heard shouting jeers at Albright, Cohen and Berger from the back of the second floor — the group who had not been handpicked to ask questions. In order to quiet and pacify the dissenters, CNN decides to allow one of them to ask a question. Enter Punk Jon Strange.

Strange: "Yes. I have a question for Secretary Albright. Why bomb Iraq when other countries have committed similar violations? Turkey, for example, has bombed Kurdish citizens. Saudi Arabia has tortured political and religious dissidents. Why does the U.S. apply different standards of justice to these countries?"

Albright: "Let me say that when there are problems such as you have described, we point them out and make very clear our opposition to them. But there is no one that has done to his people or to his neighbors what Saddam Hussein has done or what he is thinking about doing. I think that the record will show that Saddam Hussein has produced weapons of mass destruction, which he is clearly not collecting for his own personal pleasure, but in order to use. And therefore, he is qualitatively and quantitatively different from every brutal dictator that has

¹³⁷ Sinker, Daniel. We Owe You Nothing — Punk Planet: The Collected Interviews, pages 267-268.

appeared recently and we are very concerned about him specifically and what his plans might be."

Strange: "What do you have to say about dictators in countries like Indonesia, whom we sell weapons to, yet they are slaughtering people in East Timor? What do you have to say about Israel, who is slaughtering Palestinians and has imposed martial law? What do you have to say about that? Those are our allies. Why do we sell weapons to these countries? Why do we support them? Why do we bomb Iraq when they commit similar problems?"

Albright, attempting to answer a room erupting with cheers: "There are various examples of things that are not right in this world and the United States is trying..."

Drowned out by cheers, Albright stops, then continues: "I really am surprised that people feel it is necessary to defend the rights of Saddam Hussein when what we ought to be thinking about is how to make sure that he does not make weapons of mass destruction."

Strange: "I'm not defending Saddam Hussein. I am not defending him in the least. What I am saying is that there needs to be consistent application of U.S. foreign policy. We cannot support people who are committing the same violations because they are political allies — that is not acceptable. We cannot violate U.N. resolutions when it is convenient to us! You are *not* answering my question, *Madame Albright!*"

Albright: "I suggest to you, sir, that you study carefully what American foreign policy is, what we have said exactly about the cases you have mentioned. Every one of them has been pointed out, every one of them we have clearly stated our policy on. If you would like, as a former professor, I would be delighted to spend 50 minutes with you describing exactly what we are doing on those subjects."

Introduced as "the gentleman in the white shirt," Jon Strange, a self-described Punk activist had upset the situation that had been so carefully

orchestrated to limit dissent and opposition to war. Albright sat there, looking deflated, having never expected to be confronted in such a way.¹³⁸

Reflecting in an interview with Punk Planet, Strange said that a ton of Punks around the country were gathering around war protests. "I think it's much more possible in the Punk scene because we are already politically conscious, if not necessarily politically active," Strange said. "I don't think you have to convince Punk people that there are issues...A lot of Punk kids are already really active."¹³⁹

And Punks have continued to oppose war in the same vein since. Using confrontation tactics similar to those employed by the New Left in the '60s, using pacifist strategies in protests, by joining and forming anti-war organizations, Punks have made it clear that war is not acceptable.

Class, Poverty and Homelessness

"The Punk movement was originally formed in nations holding capitalist, pseudo-democratic policies. Because of this, capitalism and its problems became the first target of political Punks," explains O'Hara.

"Homelessness, classism and work-place exploitation seem to be some of the results of a system built on greed. While it is true that a capitalist system

¹³⁸ Sinker, Daniel. We Owe You Nothing — Punk Planet: The Collected Interviews, pages 293-295.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, page 301.

affords great luxuries to many members of its society, this seems to have a direct link to the exploitation of those who do not have these luxuries."¹⁴⁰ As was explained before, Punks are generally anti-capitalists for these very reasons. Punks see class, poverty and homelessness as problems directly created by capitalism. Capitalist societies base their definitions of success on the acquisition of wealth and its subsequent commodities. This system creates a middle class that is "well off" enough to sustain complacency and resistance to radical change for fear of becoming "poor." And it also generates an envy among the materially poor who desire to have the luxuries afforded to the middle classes. "The fact that people loot stereos and televisions instead of food shows that they have been convinced that a better life is more money and more goods," says O'Hara.¹⁴¹

Although, like previous countercultural movements, many Punks (especially in the United States) come from suburban, middle class backgrounds, this seems to have only made them more aware of the alienation that consumerism breeds. Perhaps because many Punks grew up in the suburbs and were then introduced to the poverty of urban areas, they are acutely aware of the entropic values of capitalism, and that the middle and upper classes gains are directly related to the suffering of the lower

¹⁴⁰ O'Hara, Craig. The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!, page 74.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., pages 74-75.

class. Punks from middle class backgrounds usually reject the comfort of material luxuries and embrace synergistic values that alleviate, if not destroy, the oppression of the lower class in favor of equality. To solve the problems of class, poverty and homelessness, Punks address the problem by attacking the entire corrupt system of capitalism, seeing them as inextricably entwined. The political economy of Punk surfaced as an alternative to participating in such a corrupt system and will be described in more detail in the next chapter. But Punks have also organized to help alleviate poverty, hunger and homelessness in the broader society they are part of.

One such organization is Food Not Bombs. Founded in San



Francisco, Punks have organized and operated Food Not Bombs chapters in cities across the country. Food Not Bombs is an organization that serves vegetarian

Figure 3.16 Food Not Bombs feeds homeless

meals wherever they can, whenever they can to hungry and homeless people. "We as one are saying fuck your bombs, feed starving people," reads a T-shirt printed by an east coast Food Not Bombs group. The idea is that the country should be using the money it spends on armaments to feed its poor. Food Not Bombs groups generally create partnerships with local businesses who donate food items that would otherwise be thrown away (bagel shops' day old bagels, items that are still good but the 'sell by' date has passed, products that don't sell, etc.) and many members purchase food items that are cooperatively cooked by the group and served in public areas (such as parks, public squares, etc.). Food Not Bombs groups throughout the country, especially in San Francisco, have been ticketed,



fined and even arrested for serving in public places without obtaining a license or permit from the government. Because of this,

Figure 3.17 Punks gathering food for Food Not Bombs

many Food Not Bombs groups have had to resort to covert operations of a sort, sometimes pulling up a truck, throwing out a bunch of bagged or boxed meals and leaving the scene before police arrive.

Punks also volunteer at homeless shelters, soup kitchens and other outreach organizations to help the poor and homeless. In fact, many Punks themselves are poor and homeless, many live collectively to alleviate financial pressures, and the great majority champion values that challenge the idea that there's something wrong with being materially poor. Punks kids are regularly seen displaying patches on their clothing or T-shirts that have slogans like "Keep warm, burn the rich," "Capitalism is cannibalism" and "Class war not race war." Bands' lyrics and writing in zines challenge the normative material and capitalist values that contribute to poverty and homelessness. And bands frequently play benefit shows from which the proceeds are donated to causes and organizations like Food Not Bombs. Most importantly, Punks try to live their lives outside of the capitalist values that contribute to problems of poverty and homelessness, actively choosing to be part of the solution instead of furthering the problem. Punks don't accept that there is nothing they can do to change the inequalities of the society they live in, and they understand that those changes have to come from carrying them out in their own lives first.

Race and Ethnicity

While Punk has been traditionally portrayed as a white youth rebellion, Hebdidge asserts that Punk adopted much of its style and philosophy from the black working classes in England, namely from West Indian immigrants, who Punks allied themselves with. Or as Punk musician Richard Hell put it, "Punks are niggers."¹⁴² From its inception, Punk allied itself with anti-racist causes. "Punk groups for instance, figured prominently in the rock Against Racism campaign set up to combat the growing influence of the National Front in working class areas," says Hebdidge. "Some Punks wore Ethiopian colours and the Rasta rhetoric began to work its way into the repertoires of some Punk groups."¹⁴³ The early Punk identification with West Indian immigrant culture in England antagonized the racist Teddy Boys, and the tension led to Ted/Punk battles becoming commonplace on King's Road in the summer of 1977.¹⁴⁴

Yet even today, Punks often find it necessary to distinguish themselves as anti-racist to combat the media misrepresentation that has led the mainstream to think of them as white supremacists. O'Hara says that in the early days of American Punk, there were few substantial differences between the skinheads and Punks. "Skinheads were definitely more

¹⁴² Hebdidge, Dick. Subculture: The Meaning of Style, page 62.

¹⁴³ Ibid., pages 66-67.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., page 67.

conformist, violent and politically apathetic than Punks, but were nowhere near the racist, white power supporters they are commonly portrayed as."¹⁴⁵

As was explained earlier in the chapter on history, skinheads initially grew out of the Mod culture as a lumpen proletariat movement.¹⁴⁶

Skinheads did little to support the growing Punk scenes other than attending (and often ruining) concerts of Punk bands. That they shared the same musical tastes and often the same haircuts (shaved heads) enabled the media and ignorant spectators to lump them together. This has proven a large mistake because of the growing radical politics of Punks and the equally growing racism and ignorance of skinheads. The middle and late '80s showed skinheads to be the enemies of a constructive Punk scene with constant violence at concerts and ties to racist organizations."¹⁴⁷

These lines have been further blurred by the separation of skinheads into the typically thought of racist skins and the lesser-known SHARPs (Skinheads Against Racial Prejudice), who maintained their original working class focus. O'Hara also differentiates Punks from skinheads by explaining that skinheads are generally extremely patriotic and nationalist (often seeing themselves as soldiers), as well as homophobic and macho, all of which are in striking contradiction to Punk ideology.¹⁴⁸ But the constant attendance of skinheads at Punk concerts caused the two very different groups to be perceived as one in the same. Due to the threat of violence by skinheads, it

¹⁴⁵ O'Hara, Craig. The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!, page 49.

¹⁴⁶ Hebdidge, Dick. Subculture: The Meaning of Style, page 55.

¹⁴⁷ O'Hara, Craig. The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!, page 49.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., pages 49-55.

wasn't until years later that Punks made it clear they wouldn't tolerate the infiltration of racism into their community any longer. A famous Punk venue in New York City, ABC No Rio helped accomplish this by establishing a "skinhead free zone" and throwing out anyone who participated in mindless violence or racist behavior. Punks have been extremely involved in organizations like Anti-Racist Action, and many bands and zines have furthered anti-racist discourse among the scene.

Moreover, it is important to emphasize that Punk was never a white-only phenomenon. From the beginning, people of many other races and ethnicities were Punks, as is evidenced in any number of early documentaries. Over its 25-year history, Punk has become even more representative of racial and ethnic minorities who could identify with the political philosophies of the counterculture. While the development and popularization of rap and hip hop provided many Black youth with an alternative to Punk, thus decreasing Black participation in the Punk community, it is notable that today the two countercultures often organize together. Rap artists like Ice T have invited Punk singers like Jello Biafra to speak on their albums, and Punk bands like Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy and the Beastie Boys have incorporated rap and hip hop into their own unique styles. Punk and hip hop bands frequently organize shows together, often benefiting political causes near and dear to both scenes.



Figure 3.18 Los Crudos sing in Spanish at a Punk show

Latino populations, on the other hand, have become increasingly involved in the Punk community over the years, especially in the United States. Perhaps the most notorious example is Chicago's seminal Latino Punk band Los Crudos. "Los Crudos achieved notoriety in the Punk scene by being unapologetically and uncompromisingly honest. Their blindingly fast, bluntly political songs were sung in Spanish, the band's native tongue, to crowds of white English-speakers..." says Sinker, in an introduction to an interview with the band.¹⁴⁹ Martin Sorrondéguy, Los Crudos' singer, said:

¹⁴⁹ Sinker, Daniel. We Owe You Nothing — Punk Planet: The Collected Interviews, page 207.

We took it upon ourselves to redefine what Latino meant to us, what community meant to us. There was no interest in playing roles for others. We fucked with their standards. We did away with their expectations of who and what we were supposed to be. We became our own voice and never waited for acceptance — we didn't need it. ... It [the band] was basically an idea to mix cultural identity with the music we wanted to do.¹⁵⁰



Figure 3.19 Clothing patch expressing unity among diverse people

Sorrondéguy explained that Los Crudos was a way of communicating political ideas to other people, especially to tell young Latinos that they weren't alone. He said that the band tried to bring politics down to a personal level that kids of all colors could understand and identify with:

A lot of kids at shows, they can't relate to a dictatorship that happened in another country, because their life will probably never run into that. Talking about immigrant issues...there's still that element of world/local politics, which affects lots of us... When you bring things down to a personal level, you're still talking about the same issues, but you bring them down to somebody's level. It's easier for them to comprehend and relate it to themselves, relate it to Punks and to everyday U.S./Chicago people.¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ Sinker, Daniel. We Owe You Nothing — Punk Planet: The Collected Interviews, page 208.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pages 211-212.

Punks have also stood in unity with Native American Indians to protect their lands, their sovereignty, their environment and their health through a number of projects. Punks have participated in Columbus Day protests and publicly spoken out about the connections between capitalist ventures that oppress people of color all over the world. Punks have emulated the traditional aesthetics of racial and ethnic minorities (such as mohawks and dreadlocks) as a way of uniting themselves with the struggle against racial stereotypes. Punk bands and zines have continued the dialogue on racism among the Punk community, generating interest in worldwide issues as well, such as the EZLN/Zapatista struggle, which many Punks traveled to Chiapas, Mexico, to support. Punks have made it clear that not only is racist ideology not tolerated among the community, but that efforts to fight racism in our society must continue. And although Punk music has been enormously important in calling attention to the issues, Sorrondeguy explains that Punk isn't just the music, saying:

You can take the music away from our politics and our lives but whether the band exists or not, we're going to go on being immigrants or immigrants' children and we're going to go on being in this same neighborhood, in the same community, dealing with the same problems whether it's immigration or racism or violence.

Feminism, Gender Roles and Sexuality

It goes without saying that if Punks are anti-authority and anti-establishment they were inclined to attack other forms of hierarchy, including patriarchy. "To me, the idea of the way men treat women is a good symbol for the way the world is run right now. It's possessive, it's based on fear and insecurity," said the Canadian Punk band No Means No:

The ideas of nurturing, caring and accepting to me are feminine virtues. As opposed to the male defects which are owning, destroying and controlling. The total male attitude and male domination of society has brought us to the point of self-destruction. One of the ways to get out of it is to stop dealing on that level, stop being totally masculine in the way we treat each other.¹⁵²

Many Punks believe "The role of patriarchy in society has been to separate men and women into stereotypes of strong and weak." According to O'Hara, "The power or strength men have often seems to be derived from their apparent



Figure 3.20 Punk grrls

¹⁵² No Means No. "Untitled interview." Maximum Rock'n'Roll #39.

ability to act unemotional, 'hard' or serious."¹⁵³ He maintains, "Clearly Punks' conception of feminism does not involve applauding women who rise (or sink) to men's stereotype of toughness."¹⁵⁴ And yet, O'Hara acknowledges, "The rejection of sexism by the Punk movement is a continuing fight to educate those who enter the movement with their stereotypical images still intact."¹⁵⁵ O'Hara concedes that many Punk bands still use sexist images and lyrics, although they receive strong backlash from the overall community and are often dropped from Punk record labels and distributors because of it. "There is no denying that sexism exists within the Punk community," he says, countering, "but it is on a smaller level than in the mainstream, and more importantly, it is discouraged and condemned by many active participants."

¹⁵³ O'Hara, Craig. The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!, page 104.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, page 105.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, page 102.

Unfortunately, the very same “tough” male attitudes O’Hara protests tend to be common in the Punk scene, which has always been an aggressive counterculture. While “Women fighting in Desert Storm, female politicians such as Margaret Thatcher, or women who gain authority and prominence in exploitative multinational corporations are not looked upon as inspirations,”¹⁵⁶ women in the



Figure 3.21 Punk grrls

Punk scene often walk a thin line trying to strike a balance between their femininity and the assertive, aggressive aesthetic of the Punk and its revolutionary philosophy. It is easy to note the more “masculine” gender roles females take on in the Punk scene, as compared to the more “feminine” roles men take on in the Goth scene, and thus conclude that Punk is a more “masculine” counterculture. Whether this phenomenon can be categorized as harmful or not, it is important to note the extreme blurring of gender roles that it results in among the Punk scene.

¹⁵⁶ O’Hara, Craig. The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!, page 105.

Women have always played an active role in the Punk community, and have broken out of traditional female gender roles, asserting themselves as empowered and aggressive. In its original aesthetic, Punk girls wore see-through shirts, fishnets and dominatrix gear in symbolic defiance of the traditional Madonna-whore dichotomy. Like so much of the original Punk aesthetic that emphasized oppression by exaggerating, Punk women intentionally highlighted the exploitation of their sexuality by taking it to extremes, similar to wearing dirty, ripped T-shirts to exaggerate poverty. Other Punk women at the time defied gender roles by wearing men's business shirts and skinny ties and by cutting their hair short.

It was Kathleen Hannah, the singer of the Punk band Bikini Kill, that coined the phrase "revolution girl-style now," that was recuperated by consumerist bands like the Spice Girls and gatherings like the Lilith Fair in the '90s and rephrased as "girl power."¹⁵⁷ Hannah explains that Punk feminists have had to learn how to redefine feminism and success because they are revolutionaries instead of reformers. "I have met feminists where their whole thing is about getting ahead within the system the way it is. They're defining success the same way it's always been defined — by money and how much control they have over their environment," Hannah

¹⁵⁷ Sinker, Daniel. We Owe You Nothing — Punk Planet: The Collected Interviews, pages 59 and 74.

said. She also explains the importance of Punks integrating a number of their beliefs cohesively, saying, "I'm really frustrated with feminism that doesn't have an analysis of capitalism, or anti-capitalism that doesn't have a racial, feminist or real class analysis."¹⁵⁸

Punk women have also been involved in the feminist challenge of the spelling of "women," which includes the word "men" in it, and have proposed alternate spellings, such as womyn, wimmin, etc.

This was carried into the Punk movement with the alteration of the word "girl" to the more aggressive "grrrl." The "girl power" Hannah is so often credited with developing was initially the rallying cry of the Riot Grrrls — Punk girls who embraced their femininity (skirts, pigtails, make up, baby doll T-shirts, etc.), and yet defied the



Figure 3.22 Kathleen Hanna of Bikini Kill

gender roles mandated to women in behaviors that were formerly thought of as "lesbian," or essentially being more assertive and "masculine." Thinking back on things she said while in Bikini Kill, Hannah reflects on the definition of beauty:

¹⁵⁸ Sinker, Daniel. We Owe You Nothing — Punk Planet: The Collected Interviews, page 67.

I know when I first started, I said things like, 'It's really great to be beautiful and powerful and sexy,' and I take a little bit of that back now. What I was saying was that you don't have to look a certain way or have a certain hairstyle to be a feminist — that just because a girl wears lipstick, that doesn't mean she's not a feminist. But now I realize that I wasn't really challenging the standards of beauty. A friend said to me, 'Why is it so subversive to be beautiful in the traditional sense? I think it's so much more subversive to create your own form of beauty and to set your own standards.' She's right.

Punk women and Riot Grrrls created an area in which women could empower themselves without having to hate their bodies. They understood that being a strong and empowered feminist is not mutually exclusive with being feminine and loving. Rather, true feminism is about women understanding what is best for them, and making responsible choices without letting culturally set gender roles dictate them for you.

Other Punk women in bands have also challenged definitions of success and gender. Carrie Brownstein of Sleater-Kinney told Punk Planet that she dislikes the things the media say about all-girl bands:

It's like they think they're paying you a compliment by taking you out of the girl-group ghetto and saying that you've transcended gender. But that's never been our goal. I mean, how could we possibly transcend something that's so experiential and part of who we are? And why would we ever want to be 'Men in Rock?' It's not a history that we're part of, nor would we like to emulate it.

The ongoing discourse on feminism and gender roles within the Punk community has not only opened doors to women, but also to men and to sexuality. "Feminism" has not been designated as a bad word to male

Punks,” says O’Hara, adding that Punk men often consider themselves to be feminists. Seminal Latino Punk band Los Crudos’ singer, Martin Sorrendeguy, even “came out of the closet” at a show his band was playing. And there have been a number of Punk bands that dedicated their lyrics solely to the purpose of ending homophobia, such as all-gay bands Pansy Division, Team Dresch and Warpath — the list is long. Another all-queer female Punk band, Tribe 8, performs wearing strap on dildos, saying it’s a way of breaking down normative taboos about sexuality and gender roles.

And in fact, it’s highly appropriate that Punks have challenged the normative values of heterosexuality, being that the word “Punk” itself goes back to the ‘50s, when young boys who were anally raped in jail were called Punks. Furthermore, the first wave of Punks “championed a sexual ambiguity and nonconformity that has lasted for years.”¹⁵⁹ This, of course, ties in with the basic nonconformist philosophy of Punk, with the movement being largely composed of people who see themselves as social misfits in one way or another.

Jody Bleyle said that her record label, Candy Ass, and band, Team Dresch, raised consciousness about sexual discrimination and equal rights, which led to her involvement in other political projects:

¹⁵⁹ O’Hara, Craig. The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!, page 115.

We'd all been in lots of bands with boys. We wanted to play good music with the best musicians we could find and we wanted them to be dykes. So we found each other — we were in ecstasy. After that, I started doing Free to Fight, which is the self-defense project that came out of Candy Ass a few years ago. We went on a big tour where we did self-defense demonstrations before all of our shows. ... It definitely helped focus the politics of the band without even realizing that it would.¹⁶⁰



Figure 3.23 Jody Bleyle of Team Dresch

Bleyle said that Punks

need to continue pushing the boundaries of what they perceive to be okay in terms of gender and sexuality:

I see and fear the attempted commercialization and definite fetishizing of 'dyke rock' or 'queer Punk.' And when I see bands who I feel don't have a broader vision than 'we rock, we're dykes,' it scares me because they're playing into the hands of the product makers. The discourse doesn't grow, it becomes calcified. We need to stay crafty.¹⁶¹

¹⁶⁰ Sinker, Daniel. We Owe You Nothing — Punk Planet: The Collected Interviews, page 222.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, page 224.

The most important thing, she said, is that the discourse about gender and sexuality continues to grow as part of Punk's overall goal of equality. "I want people to think of the queer Punk movement as a liberation movement, not any other kind, growing towards a freedom that is connected to all people's freedoms."¹⁶² The politics surrounding gender and sexuality in the Punk scene hasn't been perfected, but Punks continue to unite with the understanding that one person's struggle is the group's struggle.

Ecology, Environmentalism and Animal Rights

Despite the fact that Punks cherish their individuality, there is also an understanding among the movement that individuality must be set aside when thinking in terms of global preservation of the environment. Similar to their views against war, most Punks see the destruction of the environment and the resistance to sustainable ecological principals as a byproduct of capitalism and consumerism. "Punks reject the 'Cowboy Ethics' that have governed environmental policies and actions in America for over 200 years. This attitude has led to disastrous effects to both the environment and the ideas relating to its improvement and recovery," says O'Hara.¹⁶³ And despite the fact that Punk is essentially an urban phenomenon, with little talk

¹⁶² Sinker, Daniel. We Owe You Nothing — Punk Planet: The Collected Interviews, page 225.

¹⁶³ O'Hara, Craig. The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!, page 124.

of moving into agricultural communes, "the ideas which we have come to romantically identify with Native Americans (whether rightfully or not) are much more of an influencing factor on Punk philosophy."¹⁶⁴

O'Hara argues that Punk environmental and ecological philosophy most closely resembles Deep Ecology, a term coined in 1971 by the Norweigan philosopher Arne Naess and popularized in a 1973 book by the same name, although the philosophy itself has been around for most of time and can be found in the works of Henry David Thoreau.¹⁶⁵ The philosophy essentially says that people must not pit themselves against nature, but instead see themselves as part of it, within their own ecological niche. This requires an unlearning of the anthropocentric view that people are the center of the universe, a view found most influentially in the Christian Bible. "The Punk community is attempting to foster a biocentric philosophy in response to environmental problems," says O'Hara. "This view contains the realization that everything in nature is interconnected and has equal intrinsic worth. Nature is respected and cared for, not dominated."¹⁶⁶ O'Hara is careful to differentiate this view from conservationism, which many Punks believe is "drenched in anthropocentrism" because it stresses controlling nature,

¹⁶⁴ O'Hara, Craig. The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!, page 124.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pages 124-125.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, page 126.

something that is not only seen as wrong, but also as reformist by many Punks.

O'Hara explains the capitalist ties to the destruction of the environment and explores why the government doesn't interfere:

The Punks feel the reason for the continued destruction of the earth can often be found in economical greed. The major consideration of polluters is staying in business and increasing profits. The government does not like to interfere with profit making enterprises, especially when jobs are involved. ... From mining to lumber to the new craze of stadium building, politicians are able to cover the topic of irreversible ecological devastation with the false promise of employment to the area's residents. Those of us who live in impoverished neighborhoods chosen to be the recipient of environmental racism/capitalism can see how the promise of desperately needed job opportunities blinds us to permanent destructive developments. ... The scale which measures costs in dollar increments does not accurately weigh ecological costs in the equation.¹⁶⁷

Because Punks have recognized that "one of the best ways to refuse and resist a destructive capitalist system is to 'vote' economically,"¹⁶⁸ they tend to carefully spend their money on products they feel have the least harmful effects. Huge lists of companies to support or boycott have been published in Punk zines and are handed out at Punk shows on a regular basis. As we will see in the next chapter, Punks have created an entire political economy of their own to ensure they don't have to contribute to capitalism's destruction.

¹⁶⁷ O'Hara, Craig. The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!, page 130.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., page 131.

Another aspect of opposition among Punks to this destructive blind consumerism can be seen in vegetarianism and animal rights. First popularized by English Punk bands, many Punks (although perhaps not quite a majority of them) are vegetarians and animal rights activists, seeing the inhumane treatment of animals as another form of oppression to be tackled. 'The concept of animal rights is a frequently mentioned and debated aspect of modern Punk,' O'Hara says. "Most Punks seem to follow Pete Singer's view on the issue, holding the suffering of the creatures to be the fundamental argument against their use and the reason for legitimate rights recognition."¹⁶⁹ He says that few Punks hold the holistic environmental ideas suggested by J. Baird Caldicott that allow for the killing of animals, as most Punks see these as thinly veiled attempts to maintain the status quo.¹⁷⁰ 'Humans are no longer in a Darwinian state of nature where people must kill and use animals to survive,' says O'Hara. "The persistence of carnivorous activity strengthens not only the smug notion of human superiority but the legitimized use of violence and oppression."¹⁷¹

Still other Punks who do not agree with this concept of animal rights have become vegetarians for purely environmental reasons, citing the destructive and rapid depletion of land and water resources for raising

¹⁶⁹ O'Hara, Craig. The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!, page 134.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., page 134.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., page 135.

livestock as deplorable. And still others have become vegetarian for health reasons, preferring vegetarian and often organic diets to the consumerist fast-food garbage prevalently available. Many Punks have taken their vegetarianism to the next logic step and converted to veganism, believing it wrong or unhealthy to ingest or consume of any animal biproduct (including eggs, milk, cheese, gelatin and often even honey).

Scores of zines and records have included information on why and how to become a vegetarian or vegan, including Flipside, Maximum Rock'n'Roll, Profane Existence, Hippycore, OX, and Fight Back, and there have been several vegetarian and vegan Punk cook books published, including Soy Not Oi and Bark and Grass. Punk bands have popularized lyrics that become slogans, like Canadian Punk band Propaghandi's "Meat is still murder, and dairy's still rape."

The concept of animal rights goes well beyond vegetarianism in the Punk scene, to include strong anti-vivisectionist views. A huge number of shows and records have been benefits for the Animal Liberation Front, because of its successful direct action techniques — breaking into animal testing facilities and factory farms to "liberate" the animals, often spray painting messages on the walls to indicate the reasons for the action, so as not to be perceived as mere vandals or terrorists.

Punks have also joined such groups as Greenpeace, Earth First!, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, etc. These groups have obviously found a responsive audience among Punk circles, and have often targeted Punk audiences with advertising to recruit activists. In the summer of 1990, there were mass appeals printed in Punk zines for Punks to join with an activist group called Earth First! to stop deforestation in California, and many Punks attended, chaining themselves to Redwoods to keep them from being cut down. Books like Ernest Callenbach's Ecotopia and Dave Foreman's and Bill Hayward's Ecodefense: A Field Guide to Monkey Wrenching have also become commonly suggested reading in Punk zines and record inserts. "Whether Punks subscribe strictly to a form of Deep Ecology or create their own variation of biocentrism or holism is debatable," says O'Hara. "What is obvious, however, is the consistent stress on the deep ecological belief in the need for direct action."¹⁷²

Tradition of Dissent, Direct Action and Monkey Wrenching

Transcendental thinkers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau "cursed the 'corpse-cold' nature of institutions and protested a society in which 'man is thus metamorphosed into a thing,'" and championed instead civil disobedience as an escape from the mechanistic doom of

¹⁷² O'Hara, Craig. The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!, page 126.

bureaucracy.¹⁷³ Diggins argues that all of the American Left movements have continued that legacy of dissent, and it is certainly prevalent among Punk. Even in its shocking aesthetic, Punk strove to exaggerate the problems of capitalism (such as poverty, sexism, racism, consumerism, etc.), forcing the issues in the faces of the complacent masses. This process, in and of itself, was a form of communicating dissent, albeit an artistic one. But Punks have also continued the tradition of dissent in their preference for direct action and “monkey wrenching” whenever possible, believing it to be far more effective than reform tactics.

“The support of action over lobbying attempts has a strong tradition in the Punk movement,” says O’Hara. “While Punks may not often have the connections or resources to work with lawmakers, they often will try to change things themselves as directly as possible.”¹⁷⁴ Direct action has taken the form of monkey wrenching, protest, civil disobedience and personalization



Figure 3.24 Punks dismantling Sunoco sign

¹⁷³ Diggins, John Patrick. The Rise and Fall of the American Left, page 18.

¹⁷⁴ O’Hara, Craig. The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!, page 139.

of political ideals. "While Punks may argue over the best means of a non-violent action, the idea of employing direct action is not debated," says O'Hara.¹⁷⁵ "While...violence against authority figures [people] may meet mixed reviews, violence to property has been an active part of both pacifist and non-pacifist Punks' activities."¹⁷⁶ Destruction of property is overwhelmingly seen by Punks as an effective way to make a political statement, it is indeed regarded as a primary tactic employed by Punks, and many have fun doing it. The more creative a direct action against an inanimate object, the better, especially if it's creative in stating its purpose. Unfortunately, these "Acts are not often publicized to explain their significance, so the general public views these acts as hooliganism," says O'Hara.¹⁷⁷

But the political significance of such monkey wrenching is as apparent as it was for the Merry Pranksters of the '60s. Punks worldwide have helped to destroy animal research labs and factory farms and free the tortured animals from them. Billboards have been defaced and altered to have political messages (McDonalds is McDeath, etc.) Profane Existence has printed directions for maximizing damage to golf courses, such as pouring liquid chlorine for swimming pools or gasoline on the greens, stating

¹⁷⁵ O'Hara, Craig. The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!, page 127.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., page 92.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., page 93.

"Sabotage can be fun and educational!"¹⁷⁸ Dutch Punks went so far as to bomb a Shell Oil gas station because of the company's ties to South African exploitation. Former Dead Kennedys singer Jello Biafra has made it an ongoing theme in his spoken word tapes and tours to promote monkey wrenching and playing pranks. He even went so far as to personally run for mayor in California as a way of disrupting the monotony of the election process, and later ran as a Green Party candidate for President of the United States.

Punks largely contributed to the November 1999 protests in Seattle against the World Trade Organization, many of whom were interviewed about destroying Starbucks' and other corporate chains' storefronts during the protests. And again, these Punks gathered in April 2000 in Washington, D.C., to protest the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, where they successfully called attention to the event and stirred public debate.¹⁷⁹ One group who was instrumental in both these actions was the Ruckus Society in Berkeley, California, which trains people for direct action. "It teaches people to climb buildings and drop banners, to lock themselves to each other or to barricades, trees and roads. It teaches effective organizing

¹⁷⁸ O'Hara, Craig. The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!, pages 129-130.

¹⁷⁹ Sinker, Daniel. We Owe You Nothing — Punk Planet: The Collected Interviews, page 281.

of actions and how to deal with the media," says Sinker. Notably, many Punks participate in this organization and have been trained by it.¹⁸⁰

While many of these organizations and individuals may not be self-described Punks, many of them are and simply avoid labeling themselves as such so as not to discourage non-Punks from participating. And although it plays into the devastating stereotype of the Punk aesthetic, it is often easy to pick out the Punk contingency in any political organization by their appearance. This has, unfortunately, all too often enabled law enforcement agencies to target Punks involved in political activities.

Police Problems

Unfortunate
ly, as long as
there has been
organized dissent,
direct action and
monkey
wrenching, there
have been



Figure 3.25 Punks engaged in conflict with police at a peace march

¹⁸⁰ Sinker, Daniel. We Owe You Nothing — Punk Planet: The Collected Interviews, page 282.

corresponding problems with the police. The Ruckus Society's founder, John Sellers, was singled out and arrested by police in August 2000 at the Philadelphia protests against the Republican National Convention and "held on \$41 million bail, in part for having an 'instrument of crime,' a cell phone," says Sinker. "Undaunted by intimidation practices like these, Ruckus continues to train activists to use their voices to speak against the powers that be."¹⁸¹ And so too do most Punks participating in political action.

"About the police, there is perhaps no subject that has been the focus of as many songs, protests and general antipathy as the police," says O'Hara. In the classic Punk film documentary Decline of Western Civilization, a Punk says, "I swear to God, I hate cops."

Felix Havoc puts it more articulately in Profane Existence, "This detestation of the police are universal across the spectrum of youth sub- and counter-cultures. The police embody everything that is wrong with authority: corrupt, sadistic, racist, sexist, extortionist, cowardly scum."¹⁸² While the majority of people claim that police are "just doing their jobs," "if doing their jobs entails harassing and beating those who would dare to confront authority, they will receive no kindness from Punks."¹⁸³

¹⁸¹ Sinker, Daniel. We Owe You Nothing — Punk Planet: The Collected Interviews, page 282.

¹⁸² Havoc, Felix. "Untitled column." Profane Existence #11/12, page 10.

¹⁸³ O'Hara, Craig. The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!, page 95.

Punks have, unfortunately, been involved in countless confrontations with police, often violent. Punks have been continuously targeted at protests, often being called “gangs,” and been violently attacked because they are perceived to be a threat for practicing their constitutional rights. Punk shows and benefits have often been raided by police who unnecessarily use pepper spray to “disperse the crowd,” kicking and hitting Punk kids with their night sticks as they blindly rush for the exit doors, coughing and wheezing. As long as such treatment persists, police will likely continue to be a major target of Punks' complaints. And even without being singled out, Punks would probably continue to dislike the police on the



Figure 3.26 Police brutality clothing patch

grounds that “They are the pawns and terrorists of state power and certainly have no place in the anarchist’s society, where people could police themselves,” says O’Hara.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁴ O’Hara, Craig. The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!, page 95.

Censorship

Punk's political importance has been further legitimized by the mainstream's attacks on its music, usually spearheaded by the conservative right wing. In the mid-1980s, the Dead Kennedys became entwined in the long-since forgotten Parents Music Resource Center's censorship attempts. The PMRC held hearings in Congress, chaired by then-Senator Al Gore's wife, Tipper, along with a host of other conservative cultural critics who didn't like the music their kids were bringing home from the music stores. The Dead Kennedys weren't directly targeted at the PMRC's hearings, but the band felt the effects of the group when it was prosecuted by the Los Angeles district attorney's office shortly thereafter. The band was charged with distributing pornography to minors for printing an artistic work in its 'Frankenchrist' album of a landscape made up of penises. The band was eventually acquitted, but the trial served to break up the band and nearly bankrupt its record label, Alternative Tentacles.¹⁸⁵ The band's singer, Jello Biafra took up spoken word and went on tour, spurring debates among Punk audiences about the politics of pop culture and the culture wars of the '80s and early-'90s. His record label survived to become the second-longest

¹⁸⁵ Sinker, Daniel. We Owe You Nothing — Punk Planet: The Collected Interviews, page 34.

running independent label in American Punk history, after Bomp Records,¹⁸⁶ and Jello is still thrilling audiences with his political, pointed spoken word tours. He even ran for mayor in California, but that's another story.

¹⁸⁶ Sinker, Daniel. We Owe You Nothing — Punk Planet: The Collected Interviews, page 34.

CHAPTER 4

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF PUNK

Alternatives to Capitalism and Materialist Values

As has been noted in a variety of places throughout the last chapter, Punks have been able to avoid participating in and contributing to the corrupt and oppressive capitalist systems they oppose by creating their very own separate political economy. While the Punk scene itself has evolved enormously over the past 25 years, Sinker says that the fundamental Do-It-Yourself motivation has not. DIY is essentially the political economic backbone of the Punk counterculture. As a Punk myself, it never occurred to me that Punk had a political economy unto itself, but the more I studied it, the more obvious it seemed. Sinker explains:

[DIY is] taken as a given in Punk rock, but it's the foundation the entire culture is built upon. Punk writers aren't sitting at home hoping they'll get published, they're publishing it themselves; fans aren't waiting around hoping for someone to put out a record by their favorite band, they're releasing it themselves; we're not waiting for a club to open up that will book shows that cater to the under-21 set, we're opening them ourselves. Punk has never waited for the OK from anyone to step out on its own.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁷ Sinker, Daniel. We Owe You Nothing — Punk Planet: The Collected Interviews, page 11.

The DIY ethic has enabled Punks to create a system where they work together to provide for themselves and each other, work creatively on a variety of endeavors, and otherwise accomplish their goals, all the while supporting the community. Because the political economy initially sprang out of the music, we can start there and begin to see how Punks have found their own ways to change their world.

Punk Rock vs. the Music Industry

"The best examples of business practices within the Punk movement are seen by looking at its musical side," says O'Hara. "Punk rock differed from standard rock and roll not only in sound, lyrical content and performance styles, but also in the way the bands do their business and interact with the audiences."¹⁸⁸

The DIY ethic has been applied to Punk music in defiance of the traditional music industry. Punk bands don't generally sign recording contracts with big record labels. More often than not, they rent recording gear and have a friend record them at their practice space or live at a show, or they go to small, independent (and inexpensive) local studios. From there, most Punk bands will either release their records themselves, or go to a small, independent (Indie) label, often owned and run by a Punk or two.

¹⁸⁸ O'Hara, Craig. The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!, page 153.

Some of the smaller Punk labels have become quite developed and sophisticated over the years, but they remain true to the Punk ideals. That is, the goal has never been to make millions and become famous. Punk bands play music because they love it, and Indie labels release it at fair prices so that other Punks can enjoy it. Simple as that. There are tons of Punk records and CDs that explicitly say on their covers "Do not buy for more than..." Typical Punk pricing for a 7" record is \$3, maybe \$6-8 for an LP, and \$8-10 for a CD. Punk bands T-shirts (often self screened) usually go for about \$5-8. Most Punk bands and labels make extremely marginal profits, because that's not the goal. They are able to keep their prices low for their fans because the cost of pressing records (although some think its archaic) and CDs is fairly low, and they also save on not paying designers to create their cover artwork, choosing to do it themselves or have friends do it. They don't usually have slick, fancy print jobs, and they aren't generally distributed through national chains.

Chicago Punk trio Big Black's last album was recorded by its front man Steve Albini in 1986, which plummeted him into a recording career. Since then, he has recorded literally thousands of records. His reputation as a preeminent recording engineer eventually led to demand for his services by major labels, which he agrees to do only on his terms.

"Despite the influx of major label cash, Albini still devotes the majority of his time to recording the very people that gave him his credibility in the first place: tiny independents," says Sinker.¹⁸⁹ In an interview published in Punk Planet, Albini said:



Figure 4.1 Steve Albini of Big Black

The people who have the most resources and are the most powerful are the people who are the hardest to get paid from, the people who cooperate the least, and are the people who are most dishonest in all the business dealings. ... If you have the option of dealing with someone who is your friend, whom you can trust intimately, whom you can trust with your life, and that person will put out your records on an equitable basis where what you're getting out of the relationship is known before you get started, then the principles of your relationship are known to both parties and there's no legal threat to either party. It's just a matter of cooperation — that we're gonna keep making records as long as we're both happy. If your choice is between that sort of personal relationship where the records are made in cooperation and you know that the money is going to be distributed fairly and the other is a faceless corporate history that goes back since years before you were born and has a long-standing, well-deserved reputation for taking the money and running and crushing people's lives and careers if they put up any resistance, I don't see any incentive for dealing with the people who have aligned themselves with greed over the years. ... [Independent labels] are all labels founded on

¹⁸⁹ Sinker, Daniel. We Owe You Nothing — Punk Planet: The Collected Interviews, page 135.

the principle that the people involved are not doing it as a business venture but because they feel like they are part of a community.¹⁹⁰

Another reason for maintaining DIY or Indie bands and labels is that the bands maintain better control over their own music. The corporate music industry has traditionally taken the control away from bands, telling them when to tour, setting prices, demanding a certain number of releases and even deciding how and where to promote the bands. Even Punk bands that have achieved widespread recognition or "success" often aren't concerned with making money, they just want to break even and have a good time producing their artwork (music), traveling and meeting new people along the way, and perhaps even spreading their political messages.

Ian MacKaye's first band, The Teen Idles, was one of the first Punk bands to emerge in Washington, D.C. He and Jeff Nelson started one of the first DIY Punk labels, Dischord Records, in 1980. And MacKaye then went on to play in Minor Threat, Embrace and Fugazi. MacKaye said that having a DIY ethic makes him feel like "the Shakers or the Amish or something" because it seems like an old-fashioned way of doing things, but he said that there's a reason for doing things yourself. For him, it's because he's most comfortable that way and his band has control over its own destiny. You

¹⁹⁰ Sinker, Daniel. We Owe You Nothing — Punk Planet: The Collected Interviews, pages 138-141.

can't make excuses and blame someone else, and in terms of the music, the band isn't indebted to a label:

One aspect of Do It Yourself is that you really have to do it yourself. It's work! We manage ourselves, we book ourselves, we do our own equipment upkeep, we do our own recording, we do our own taxes... The way people perceive the music system now is that you have all these other people doing all this stuff for you. But that's not Punk rock.¹⁹¹

While DIY is undoubtedly difficult it enables Punk bands to maintain control over their own destinies. It also helps them keep from becoming elitist, arrogant rock stars. From its beginnings, Punk backlashed against the disconnect between performer and artist in the glam rock scene. An underlying theme behind Punk music is that it's generally simple enough that anyone can learn to play it, and therefore the people in Punk bands are frequently just other Punk kids, sometimes from your own community, and are easy to relate to. Very few Punk bands are ever elevated to a "star" status, and if they let their popularity go to their heads and begin to distance themselves from their fans, tour in posh tour buses, stay in hotels rather than with kids from the scene, they are criticized and called "sell outs."

Punks are also able to stay connected with their fans by touring through a vast Punk network, which I will address more later. Punk bands also have access to Punk "distros" (distributors) and zines, which help to

¹⁹¹ Sinker, Daniel. We Owe You Nothing — Punk Planet: The Collected Interviews, page 20.

distribute and promote their releases to the Punk community worldwide. One such distro is Mordam Records, which was founded almost 20 years ago by Ruth Schwartz. Independent labels including Alternative Tentacles (Dead Kennedys and Jello Biafra's spoken word), Lookout (Green Day, Operation Ivy, the Donnas), Kill Rock Stars (Sleater-Kinney, Bikini Kill, Elliot Smith), Jade Tree (the Promise Ring, Jets to Brazil, Lifetime), Amphetamine Reptile (the Melvins and much of the non-Seattle-based grunge of the early '90s), have all worked in partnership with Mordam Records distribution at one point in time, and many still do. Schwartz explained that she started the distro because a lot of distributors weren't paying their vendors, and that by forming a collective-like distro, she felt there would be a power-in-numbers effect, forcing the distros to pay the small labels more promptly. She worked heavily with Tim Yohannan of Maximum Rock'n'Roll and Jello Biafra to get the distro started, and from there, Mordam has been one of the biggest distributors of Punk music. In an interview with Punk Planet, Schwartz said:

If I wanted somebody to know something about Mordam, it's that we are here to support small record labels supporting their bands. And so we want to make sure that the artist, being the most important in the equation, is supported and is able to work with labels who will basically be honest and fair and who will be unlike major labels and unlike major corporations. ... Our job is to get the sales together. Let the label and the artist have the presence.¹⁹²

¹⁹² Sinker, Daniel. We Owe You Nothing — Punk Planet: The Collected Interviews, page 115.

Zines

It's often difficult to describe to people who haven't seen one what exactly a "zine" is. It's anticlimactic at best and inaccurate at worst to simplify zines by saying that they're self-published mini-magazines. In the only book of its kind, Zines: Notes From the Underground and the Politics of Alternative Culture, Stephen Duncombe says that when he is asked to define zines:

My initial — and probably correct — impulse is to hand over a stack of zines and let the person asking the question decide, for this is how they were introduced to me. ... Scattered around their apartment, piled precariously on the coffee table, buried under old pizza boxes, forgotten in the cracks of the sofa, were scruffy, homemade little pamphlets. Little publications filled with rantings of high weirdness and exploding with chaotic design. Zines. ... Somehow these little smudged pamphlets carried within them the honesty, kindness, anger, the beautiful inarticulate articulateness — the uncompromising life that I had discovered (and lost) in music, then later radical politics, years ago. Against the studied hipness of music and style magazines, the pabulum of mass newsweeklies, and the posturing of academic journals, here was something completely different. In zines, everyday oddballs were speaking plainly about themselves and our society with an honest sincerity, a revealing intimacy and a healthy 'fuck you' to sanctioned authority — for no money and no recognition, writing for an audience of like-minded misfits.¹⁹³

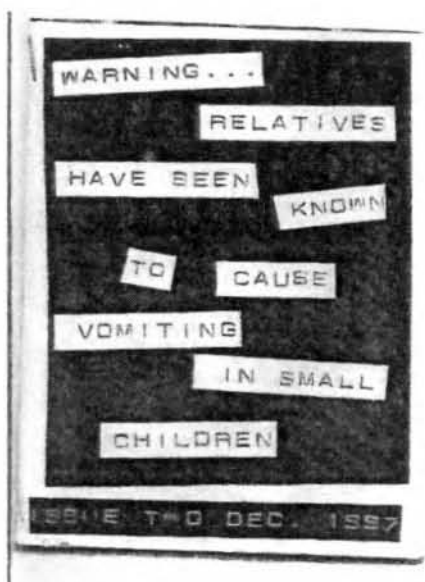
Duncombe uses zines as the window from which to view everything about the underground Punk counterculture and its politics. And indeed, all of it

¹⁹³ Duncombe, Stephen. Zines: Notes From the Underground and the Politics of Alternative Culture, page 1.

can be found in literally thousands of zines produced by average people all over the world.

Slug & Lettuce, Pathetic Life, I Hate Brenda, Dishwater, Punk and Destroy, Sweet Jesus, Scrambled Eggs, Maximum Rock'n'Roll—these are among the thousands of publications which circulate in a subterranean world rarely illuminated by the searchlights of mainstream media commentary. In this multifarious underground, Pynchonesque misfits rant and rave, fans eulogize, hobbyists obsess. Together they form a low-tech publishing network of extraordinary richness and variety. Welcome to the realm of 'zines.¹⁹⁴

'Zines range from cut-and-paste photocopied newspaper clippings, to personal diaries published to share insight with the community, to reviews of



albums, political commentary, all the way up the media chain to include major publications that have been operating for 20+ years and have managed to maintain a steady stream of advertisers (generally punk music labels and other 'zines).

Figure 4.2 Alabama Grrr! Issue 2

¹⁹⁴ Duncombe, Stephen. Zines: Notes From the Underground and the Politics of Alternative Culture, page 191.

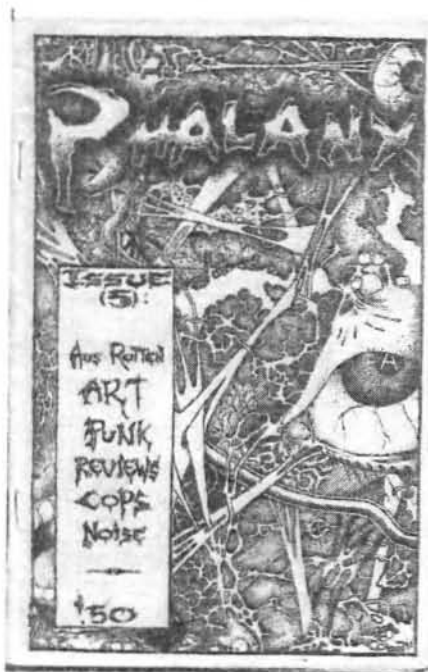


Figure 4.3 Phalanx Issue 2

Brian D'Agosta, Punk publisher of

DIY zine Phalanx said:

The great thing is that anyone can do a 'zine—it's the same concept as punk music—if you have a thought, you can shout it from the rooftops. So, it's effectively the power and ability to create your very own media—you just take control and write what *you* would want to read [in the mainstream media]. And admittedly, it doesn't hurt that you get free records to review on the side and get to interview your favorite bands.

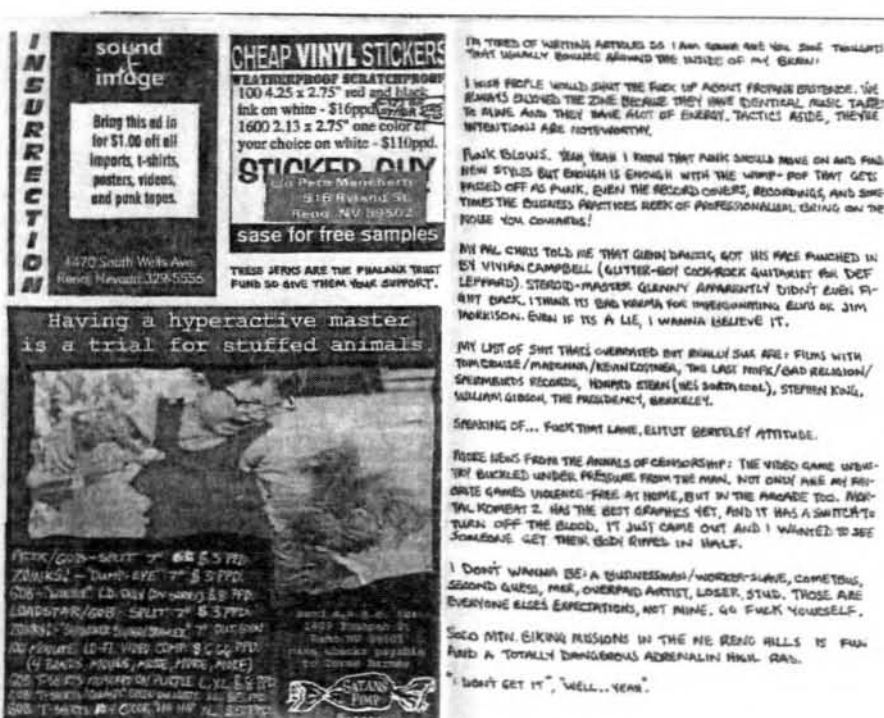


Figure 4.4 Phalanx Issue 2 inside page

The idea is the same as it was for the music — that there shouldn't be a huge chasm between the writer and the reader, the performer and the audience. Punk kids everywhere produce zines from whatever limited resources they may have available to them. Some are handwritten, many are typed, most cut and pasted together with no knowledge



Figure 4.5 I'm Johnny and I Don't Give a Fuck Issue 3

of writing style, journalistic skill or graphic design theories. They range from extremely "amateur" and "messy" looking, poorly written and not edited, 8.5 x 11" bad photocopies folded in half and stapled together, to the more sophisticated, long-standing, well-known zines that have been quoted throughout this thesis, including Maximum Rock'n'Roll, Profane Existence, Slug and Lettuce, Punk Planet, etc., that are designed on computers by people with some knowledge of the publishing field, written by just about anyone and everyone, including career writers, and professionally printed in magazine or tabloid format, often including color. There's a zine for everyone's taste.



Figure 4.6 Profane Existence

[illegible]

Figure 4.7 Profane Existence inside page

There is no doubt that the computer revolution will produce even more 'zines than have been published in years past, if only because it is less expensive. E-'zines have already become very popular and are quickly proving able to provide much larger audiences than was previously accessible to punks in isolated cities. Many e-'zines have also latched on to the idea that they can be interactive, including chat rooms and message boards to generate more communication among readers. But there is also little chance that e-'zines will replace the photocopied, stapled little publications that have historically circulated throughout the punk scene, if for



Figure 4.8 Punk Planet Issue 46



Figure 4.9 Collage of Punk Planet covers

no other reason than the fantastic artistry involved in producing them. In fact, many Punks have 'zine collections that rival the size of their album collections. "I just love picking up something that someone put so much time and energy into and reading their very personal perspectives," said Sarah Kriedler. "It's just great to know that there are real people out there who are just like me."

But perhaps more important than the DIY ethic that encourages Punks everywhere to create their own zines is the fact that they are a way of



Figure 4.10 Revolution Calling
Issue 12



Figure 4.11 The World is Broken Issue 1

communicating totally uncensored information with other people in the community. Zines offer up hundreds of band and record reviews and interviews, eloquent poetry about an Emotional experience, as well as brutally honest social and political critiques. And again, like the music, because zines are the art of their creators, because those creators want to share their art, and because the DIY methods generally keep the production costs fairly low, zines are readily available throughout the Punk scene and are often free or less than \$2. Anyone can afford to buy one, and anyone can afford to produce one.

Networks

While Punk scenes in individual cities tend to be fairly tight knit, one doesn't need to look far to figure out how they might find other like-minded people in a city they've never been to before. From the creators of Maximum Rock'n'Roll and members of the Bleeding Heart Collective, a priceless publication called Book Your Own Fucking Life is released on a yearly basis, and has been for more than 10 years now. Each year Maximum Rock'n'Roll publicizes that it is collecting listings for Book Your Own Fucking Life. Hundred of Punks from around the world send in their contact information to

be listed in the annual publication.

Book Your Own Fucking Life is essentially a Punk directory. It is broken down by country and U.S. states, and then by bands, Indie record stores, people who promote shows, Indie recording studios, zines, and anyone else who is open to the idea of a Punk they don't know calling to ask to "crash" at their place.

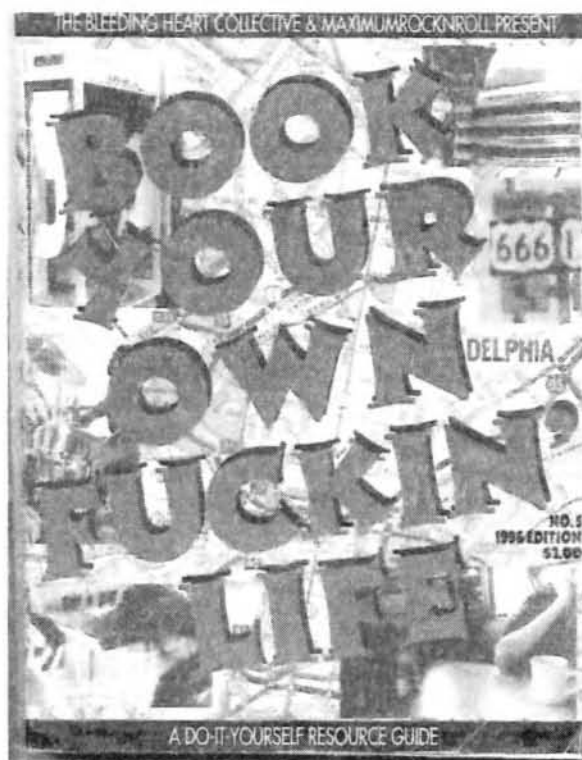


Figure 4.12 Book Your Own Fuckin' Life No. 5 1996

Bands use Book Your Own
Fucking Life to book their tours
 without fear of playing at a
 place that is hostile to Punk
 bands, zine creators use it to
 distribute their zines to record
 stores that will carry Punk
 literature, and Punks who just
 need to get away for a while
 use it to find free places to stay
 in about whatever destination



their hearts desire. Figure 4.13 Book Your Own Fuckin' Life inside page

You get the idea. Book Your Own Fucking Life is like the Yellow
 Pages of the Punk community and it keeps people from all corners of the
 world fairly well connected. I have personally been listed in Book Your Own
Fucking Life, I have used it to book my band's tours, I have used it to meet
 new people and find places to stay when traveling, and I know many other
 Punks who have too. Because listings in Book Your Own Fucking Life are
 not edited out, and there is no Better Punk Bureau, connections made
 through this Punk network are definitely "buyer beware." But even if you do



meet a whacko or two, you're almost guaranteed to make a lifelong friend as well.

Figure 4.14 Punks collecting money at the door of a show space

Squatting and Communal Living

Punk squatters are also known to use Book Your Own Fucking Life when they are in need of a place to stay while traveling to the next city or after having been kicked out of a squat. While some Punk squats, mainly in New York City, provide fairly permanent housing to their occupants, most Punk squatters are nomads of sorts, constantly traveling to find their next



Figure 4.15 Punk squatters with their dog panhandle for change home. The idea of squatting is essentially that if there's an abandoned building not being used, it's up for grabs. If you can make it livable and keep from being caught by the owner or police, you have a home, and you're making more productive use of it than the owner was. Punk squatters, sometimes called gutter Punks, often live in dangerous and unstable conditions. They choose this way of life as an alternative to participating in capitalism. Many squatters do not believe in the idea of property or land ownership. Many of them would rather spend their time fixing up an abandoned building to live in than working for someone else to earn money to pay someone else to provide them a place to live in. Whatever the

reasons for squatting, it exists in every major metropolitan area in the United States and is common in many other countries as well.

Another alternative to relieve the pressures of the capitalist society we live in, albeit less extreme, is communal living. Punks everywhere have found that living communally not only lessens one's expenses, but it also builds a deeper sense of community and friendship. Some Punks live together in smaller groups of three or four people to a particular dwelling, but other Punks have created what have come to be known as "Punk houses." Punk houses are usually fairly large houses with several floors, bedrooms and common areas. Many Punks will live in these houses together, often with more than one person to a bedroom. The people living in the house will share all the expenses (usually evenly), and often share furniture, household items, food, etc. Many Punk houses also serve as band practice spaces, places to do small shows, community gathering places, organizing centers (for groups like Food Not Bombs), and sometimes even have spaces to show art.

In Pittsburgh, one current Punk house, ironically dubbed "the Peach Pit" after the name of a hang out in the '90s teen drama Beverly Hills 90210, was a three-story house that had about 12 occupants at any one time, some students, some artists. Most of the punks living at the Peach Pit helped prepare warm, vegetarian meals for the homeless as part of local Food not



Figure 4.16 Show spaces often serve as places for bands to play and for squatters to live in

Bombs efforts. The house hosted Punk shows on a fairly regular basis, and also served as a band practice space for the inhabitants. Other current communal Punk spaces include ABC No Rio in New York City, One in Twelve Club in England, the Breakdown Book Collective and Hogbutler in Denver, Epicenter and Gilman Street Project in San Francisco, and THD House in Minneapolis have provided various community functions, from hosting shows and political organizations to cooking for the homeless and showing Punk artists and films.

A number of Punk squats have also become relatively famous (or infamous, as the case may be), such as the One in Twelve Club in England, the C Squat and Fifth Street Squat in New York City, and the Vats Hardcore

Squat in San Francisco. Squat or Rot was a collective of Punks in New York City in the late '80s to early '90s that formed a squatters rights group and released albums to benefit and draw attention to the group's efforts. Well-



known punk bands often formed after their members had lived together in squats, including Chumbawumba, Crass, Christ on Parade and Neurosis.

Figure 4.17 Squatters sometimes find themselves sleeping outside

Punk houses and safe squats also serve another purpose in the Punk community. They often serve as safehouses for Punks who would probably otherwise become homeless. Punk kids are unfortunately often kicked out of their homes or runaway from them, and without places like Punk houses to go to, they would end up in danger on the streets. And Punks who find themselves evicted, out of a job, or otherwise without a place to stay can usually find shelter at their local Punk house. In fact, many Punks use local Punk houses as a place of residence in between finding somewhere else to

go. Because of this, the turnover in tenants at Punk houses tends to be relatively high, sometimes to the point that the people who live there are unsure who exactly is occupying what room.

What is perhaps most significant about Punk houses is their lack of formal organization or specific leadership. They are almost always organized collectively by the people who live in them at the time, and tend to be small enclaves of anarchy. They support and promote the people who live in them and the artistic and political endeavors they choose to pursue. Punk houses rarely resort to any form of "house rules," but everyone acknowledges the importance of cooperation.

CHAPTER 5

CO-OPTATION — NO FUTURE?

Co-optation and Evolution

In their book Up They Rise, Jamie Reid and Jon Savage said:

Revulsion was the authorized social response to Jamie Reid's graphics for the Sex Pistols [albums]. The most potent visible manifestation of disquiet during the 1977 Royal Jubilee celebrations was a photograph of the Queen—defaced by blackmail style lettering and a safety pin through the lip—reproduced on posters, ads and sleeves for the Sex Pistols' single 'God Save the Queen.' ... Punk was soon taken seriously when the marketing men and the media and the music business saw its strength of identification, although Jamie remained continually at war with industry bosses. To the consternation of authorities at home, college and town hall, the icons of punk exploded on a thousand leather jackets in a thousand different towns, and started leading their own lives. What they were mainly saying was, 'DO IT. GO ON. SAY IT. ASK.' And furthermore, 'We don't like what you're doing to us. Why are you ramming this [pop culture] down our throats?'¹⁹⁵

Punk has always encouraged individuals to be creative and unique in their own way, making it extremely difficult for the mainstream to grab hold of any single trend, package and market it (thereby diminishing the oddity and threatening aesthetic of Punk). Unfortunately, like many cutting edge movements, punk has slowly been usurped, watered down and co-opted

¹⁹⁵ Reid, Jamie and Jon Savage, Up They Rise, 1987, page 3.

into mainstream pop-culture — the very thing it set out to reject and destroy. Over time, a number of music styles that were heavily influenced by Punk — namely Grunge — became popular, got radio play and generated a renewed interest by the marketing industry in Punk. Immediately following the Grunge craze in the early '90s, the music industry began to position a number of the more poppy-sounding Punk bands for stardom. As a result, bands like Green Day and Rancid were accused by Punks of selling out on their D.I.Y roots as they signed to major labels, played huge rock arena concerts, and otherwise basked in the glory of their newfound fame. It was this marketing push that paved the way for the '90s co-optation of Punk, with a whole wave of new "Pop-Punk" bands getting radio play and selling out shows at major venues.

Nineteen ninety-four was an interesting time in Punk. For the first time in more than a decade, the mainstream media was paying close attention to the underground, thanks to the fame of Nirvana and the signing frenzy that followed. Green Day was poised to rocket to stardom and there were dozens of newly-signed Punk bands ready to follow them to glory...¹⁹⁶

Whether this co-optation is a good or bad thing for the Punk community in general is debatable. While having spikey hair and dying it funny colors was considered quite shocking as recently as the mid-'90s, it's now a fairly mainstream occurrence and is generally accepted that most

¹⁹⁶ Sinker, Daniel. We Owe You Nothing — Punk Planet: The Collected Interviews, pages 1-2.

teenagers go through such a phase. Tattoos and piercings have also become much more common and are now considered acceptable and even cool by most "normal" kids. And while, on the one hand, this means Punk has been successful in altering what the broader culture finds acceptable in terms of appearance, it is also disturbing because of the concurrent lack of understanding. Many Punks realize that the mainstream acceptance of the four-chord, raw Punk sound and of its particular aesthetic show only a shallow understanding of the deeper principles they represent — the cultural and political normative values haven't actually been changed. In an article by Mark Solotroff, he explains that the ironic adoption of the Punk aesthetic by high-end brand-name companies only shows the complete misunderstanding of the bondage and slavery of capitalism that wearing chains and padlocks originally represented:

Chains with padlocks...as a fashion accessory, are now emerging more into the mainstream, due in part to the continued mining of Punk Rock for style directions. Sid Vicious, the second bassist of the Punk Rock group the Sex Pistols, bears a chain and padlock around his neck in many of the well-known photographs taken of him, which became a standard item in the iconography of various sub-genres within Punk Rock music. Chains with padlocks are currently being sold as bracelets and necklaces in both high-end jewelry stores and more modestly priced boutiques, widely ranging in price depending upon the brand and the types of materials used. Fashion houses such as Coach, Prada, and Louis Vuitton, are using them as accessories on handbags, while Christian Dior is currently offering padlock jewelry.¹⁹⁷



Figure 5.1 A Punk show serves as a benefit for Mumia Abu-Jamal, a political prisoner on death row

¹⁹⁷ Solotroff, Mark, Daily Dose, *Shackle Style*, 2001, page 4-5.

And if suburban parents think its ridiculous when their kids adopt Punk fashions, they might be surprised to discover that so do most Punks. "Even with Punk hitting the mainstream, it is still a watered down version. I rarely see or read about *any* liberal political Punk types. Most 'Punks' you do see are rioting hoodlums or pop music fads. You could say MTV has lots of Punks on but they are not what I identify with," said Jon Schoeffel.

Within the past five years, not only have fashion accessory designers co-opted old Punk fashion styles, but now there are entire stores in most suburban malls, such as Hot Topic, that sell pre-made rebellion. Where punks used to rip up their own T-shirts and spray paint political slogans on them, that "individuality" can now be purchased in the mall by throwing down your parents' credit card. T-shirts with a black star emblazoned on the fronts that used to represent anarchist unity are now sold for \$35 to suburban teenagers who know nothing of the political concept. Where Punks used to hand-sew zippers and D-rings onto their favorite plaid pants, Hot Topic now sells bondage pants pre-made for \$95. Combat boots that used to be purchased at the Army surplus store, are now sold at mainstream department stores for three times the price. But worse than the pricing on these items is the loss of creativity and encouragement of independent thought that was formerly found through the D.I.Y creation of one's own aesthetic.

"This kind of stuff just really goes against everything Punk is about. It's marketing to the brainless masses, and now it's even being targeted at us. They're really shameless," Sarah Kriedler said of the fashion craze. "It just makes people think that we're all just fashion slaves or something. It totally distracts people from seeing all the wonderful things Punks do, like Food Not Bombs, and all the benefit shows Punk bands play for various causes, and just the fact that our presence makes younger kids more politically aware and responsible."

Bikini Kill's singer Kathleen Hanna has had to endure the co-optation of her famous phrase, "revolution girl-style now," watching the Spice Girl's chant "girl power" and hundreds of young women attending the Lilith Fair with Biore pore-strips plastered to their noses as part of a flagrant marketing scheme. But, partly due to Hanna's work, women have been recognized as a market force, and while the result has been warped, she says it helps to know that some of those young girls will eventually "get it." In an interview, she said, "It's scary to see something that at one point in time was really important to you turned into a sound bite. But I still get a lot of really cool mail from girls all over the world, and that's definitely a result of the media attention." ¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁸ Sinker, Daniel. We Owe You Nothing — Punk Planet: The Collected Interviews, pages 59, 65-66.

Dead Kennedys' singer Jello Biafra has lectured a lot on what he calls "the culture wars." He says that commercial music has been completely dumbed-down for mainstream audiences and contemporary music has virtually no value. Speaking to Punk Planet, Jello said:

Whenever my girlfriend has the so-called 'alternative' station on in her car, it drives me nuts. On the surface it sounds like whatever they are shoveling at us now are bad imitations of Pearl Jam and Nirvana, but when you listen a little closer (especially to the commercial Pop-Punk bands), I find no difference between them and the most horrible era of the Eagles. The only difference is that the guitars are louder.¹⁹⁹

Jello said the only reason he believes the major labels ever picked up on Punk:

...was to avoid a whole generation of suburban white kids getting their political knowledge from angry black rappers. They don't want white kids to know that things are that bad for a large number of people. They would much rather have people with shoe-gazer lyrics: 'Oh, boo-hoo, my girlfriend left me, I'm so depressed. I'm white, middle-class and confused. Gee I feel so sorry for myself.' That's the major label lyrical angle.²⁰⁰

He hopes that Punk bands that are able to make it big will use the opportunity to "come out in more support of political organizing and organizations..." He said that Green Day did a high-profile Food Not Bombs benefit concert that raised \$50,000 to feed vegetarian meals to the

¹⁹⁹ Sinker, Daniel. We Owe You Nothing — Punk Planet: The Collected Interviews, page 40.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 42.

homeless,²⁰¹ and has high hopes that a handful of bands that get caught up in the co-optation will carry on the message.

While kids everywhere are now being exposed to watered down Pop-Punk and co-opted aesthetic that has lost most of it's original meaning, the Punk community hasn't been entirely replaced by the consumer fad. The Punk community remains strong, albeit somewhat smaller, as an underground current fights to keep the culture and its ideas alive. Some of the kids who are exposed to Pop-Punk on the radio will pick up a political message or two, here and there, and may eventually go to a warehouse show to see a local Punk band, where they may be turned on to the "real thing." The youth who are lucky enough to find the Punk community that remains undisturbed by mainstream co-optation and corruption will undoubtedly learn a lot about culture and politics from their experiences among it. They will become politically conscious and often politically active through the Punk community. They will carry on a 25-yearold tradition in Punk, and an even older tradition of dissent through the Left, long enough to grow up believing in the option of a new utopian paradigm and pass it on to a whole new generation. Punks grow up like everyone else, and many of them fall out of the "scene" and go about their lives. What's important is that

²⁰¹ Sinker, Daniel. We Owe You Nothing — Punk Planet: The Collected Interviews, page 41.

they take what they've learned from Punk with them and never give up on their own ideals. Recognizing this, Jello said:

...Most of the people...aren't going to be radical or Punk rockers forever, unfortunately, so it's important to learn from the mistakes of the people who came before us, people we admire...and people we no longer admire like the '60s radicals who turned around and became right-wing cyber-yuppies. And don't let the attitude you have now evaporate if you start making money and working for IBM. Always keep that with you and make sure it's passed down to your children. Don't give up and don't mellow out.²⁰²

It's also going to be imperative that old Punks who have grown up and away from the scene learn to recognize the next generation of Leftists to come along so we can support them. They are not likely to have the same hairdos, or listen to the same music. We must use caution not to see them through our jaded eyes as poseurs or to condemn them as idealistic dreamers. Because Punk hasn't to date been acknowledged as a legitimate extension of the radical Lefts before it, it will be even more important for those who have been involved in Punk over the past 25 years to show those who come next the long line of radicals who came before them. Without us being acknowledged, the future of the Left has no link to its past. Punks (and arguably their predecessors) didn't have the benefit of guidance, knowledge and history of the progressives before them. Power structures and

²⁰² Sinker, Daniel. We Owe You Nothing — Punk Planet: The Collected Interviews, page 47.

normative values will never be changed if each generation of radical thinkers has to relearn the lessons that have been lost to history time and time again. The spirit of the Left lives on in Punk for the time being, and time will surely evolve this Leftist movement into a challenging and inspiring new one. But let's not let time show a huge gap in the history of the Left, where Punks have bravely carried the torch without recognition.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS — SO WHAT?

The Political Significance of Punk

I hope I've illustrated a number of the ways in which Punks are political, both as individuals and in collaborative groups. But to echo a question so many Punks frequently ask, "So what?" What does the existence of the Punk subculture mean politically? What difference has it made? What is its value?

A Ray of Hope in a Sea of Apathy

While pondering these questions, it seemed enough to me that the Punk counterculture has been able to raise the level of political awareness among a notoriously apathetic American population, not to mention among teenagers. It seems hugely significant that Punks are aware of the political climate in their neighborhoods, in their state, in their country and abroad when compared to ever-growing political apathy in the United States. And in the shadow of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and an impending war with Iraq, it seems obvious to me that Punks, more so than the general population, question their values and those of the society in which they live,

and they involve themselves in being part of the solution to the world's problems. Right down to being aware of the political implications of the types of soap they buy and the food they eat, to being a friend to people of other nationalities while riding the bus, Punks are conscious of the political implications of their actions. But again, why does that make a difference? I believe it makes a difference in several key ways.

Political Consciousness and Choice

For one, every individual that becomes conscious of the impacts of their actions can make a difference in their day-to-day choices. Punks may choose to hang out for coffee with their friends at the local mom-and-pop shop instead of at Starbucks. This makes a difference because, added up collectively, those who choose independents over national chains do send a message to large corporations that a significant market is not interested in homogenization, gentrification and globalization. Punks often choose not to buy products from companies like Gillette and Proctor & Gamble because they still perform animal testing on all of their products. For every Punk who boycotts these products, those companies get the message in loss of dollars that some consumers will not support animal tested products. Over time, such grassroots activism on the part of individuals has made a difference — just look at the number of lotions and shampoos that are now labeled “Not

tested on animals." They didn't add this label for no reason. These companies have conducted massive market research telling them that there are large numbers of consumers who won't buy products tested on animals. And the same works in reverse — punks also choose to support products and companies who hold similar political and social values. So the individual actions of Punks, like any individual, can make a huge impact when looked at collectively.

Influencing Others

Second, Punks make a political difference by touching the lives of those around them. I have had a number of teachers, co-workers, bosses and neighbors tell me that they were much less likely to judge a person by how they looked after getting to know me. They originally had the impression that I was a troublemaker, probably a drug user, a low-life, apathetic, disturbed kid. They learned that, while I may have been a bit of a rabble-rouser, I disproved their preconceptions and judgments. This changing of preconceptions doesn't just help other Punks either. Those people who have learned not to "judge a book by its cover" are also less likely to judge a person by their skin color, or the clothes they can't afford, or the foreign accent they have. Therefore, the individual impression Punks

make on those around them helps to spread tolerance. This ultimately leads to changing the normative values of society.

Inspiring a New Generation

Third, Punks are able to inspire those around them by living by example. Everyone gets introduced to politics somewhere. Many Punks supply an energetic political activism that most teenagers don't find at home or in school. Punk serves as a breeding ground for people who become politically conscious in large part due to the influence of those around them. They then become interested in generating new political ideas and ideals, and in making political change happen.

Working with Other Activists for Change

Which leads to a fourth area of impact — Punks frequently join up with other politically active groups to make massive political statements, such as at protests and rallies. Here the individual voices are gathered together into one unified goal, where it is more likely covered by the news media and considered by the politicians.

In all of these ways, and probably several others, Punks are bringing political causes to the forefront. But that alone doesn't make Punks special or significant. What does is that Punks are one of the only active groups to

take on so many liberal political causes. They are, as I have argued throughout this thesis, the extension of the political Left.

Diggins' American Left Re-emerged

Diggins argues that the political Left retreated to the safety of the classroom, and in doing so has handicapped itself by limiting progressive ideas to theoretical discussions in Political Science 101 lecture halls. And he may be right, in the sense that the Hippies of yesteryear don't seem to be out gathering in numbers much these days, much less really changing or country's values. And besides, the Hippies were the last generation's Left. So where is the new Left? Where is my generations' Left? You won't find it in the tech savvy capitalist conversation of the dot-com craze. You won't find it materialist instant gratification of the "me generation." Much like the Lefts before us, you'll find us coming from the abundance of poverty in 1970s England, and from the poverty of abundance in today's homogenized suburbs. You will find this generations' progressives in the coffee houses, and small shows of local bands, creating independent artwork, hanging out in public parks, all the while talking politics — "How can we make our world a better place?"

And you'll find that Punks everywhere, all over the globe now, are making a significant difference. We're everywhere, and we're unified in

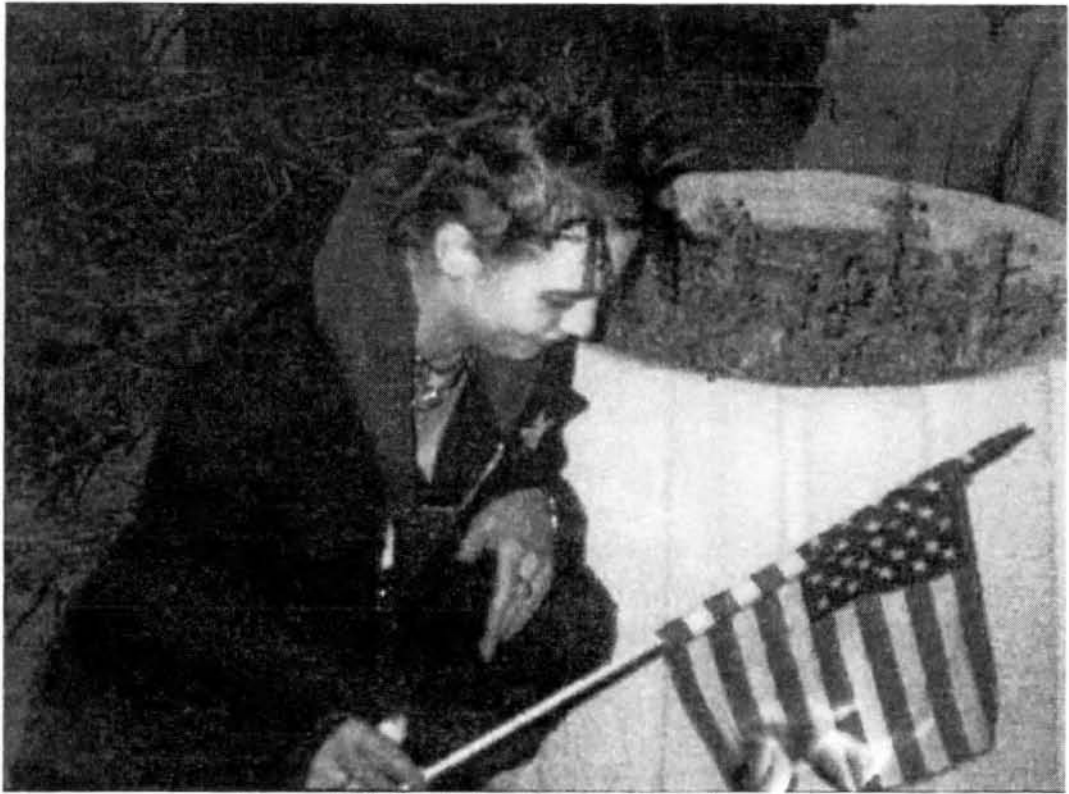


Figure 6.1 Punk burning an American flag

similar progressive ideas and ideals as the Lefts before us. The world has changed over the years, and so too have the issues that illustrate those causes — but they are uniquely Left no matter the time period. We all want to push the limits of freedom to their farthest possible conclusions. We want to experiment with and change the reality we've been told is the only way. We want to create our own values, and our own destinies. And over time, the normative basis of society is changed. Just as the Lyrical Left made way for the Old Left and them for the New Left, today there are Punks carrying

on the torch of radical idealism throughout the globe. And just as the Lefts before us each contributed to changing society, so are Punks.

In trying to define what the political Left is, Diggins uses the following criteria: advocacy of change, a clear set of political ideals, tradition of dissent, and an ideology defined by an optimistic belief in rationalism and the goodness of human nature.²⁰³ When Punk is compared to former Lefts using these criteria, it is clear that it can be categorized that way. But in order to “approach a historical understanding of {the Lefts’} *function and role* in 20th century America,”²⁰⁴ Diggins outlines a number of other criteria — factors that may be used to weigh the significance of a political movement. They are:

The Left as an Oppositional Force
to the Right and Center

The Left is better understood when seen against the background of other political philosophies. ... The conservative Right has generally stood for the primacy of family, religion, authority and property. The radical Left, in contrast, has called for the liberation of the young, the demystification of religious beliefs, the destruction of traditional authority and the abolition of private property. The liberal Center — the Left’s chief antagonist — has generally been committed to a pluralistic balance of power, an equilibrium of class interests, and ethic of opportunity and achievement and a realistic vision of human limitations. The Left, in contrast, has demanded the liquidation of institutionalized

²⁰³ Diggins, John Patrick. The Rise and Fall of the American Left, pages 27-38.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, page 39.

power and interest politics, the elimination of social classes, the replacement of competitive life with one of fraternal participation and cooperative fulfillment and unlimited visions of human possibility.²⁰⁵

Punk clearly fits Diggins' definition of the role of the Left here, which is clearly significant through the friction it provides the political system. What are the Left and the liberal Center without opposition from the radical Left?

The Left as Negation

In simplest terms, to negate is to deny that the prevailing understanding of reality is valid. Whereas some conservatives or some liberals may regard war, poverty or alienation as permanent features of history, the Left regards such phenomena as transitory features of the stages of history... Thus, rather than defending current conditions, as do conservatives, or reforming them, as do liberals, the Left has sought to transform present society in the hope of realizing 'unborn ideals' that transcend historical experience. ... The perpetual dilemma of the Left is that it has had to treat the impossible as if it were possible...²⁰⁶

Again, Punk clearly fits into this role, being one of the only current subcultures to promote radical social and political change, and who struggle to realize ideals that mainstream society has deemed impossible and out of the scope of reality.

The Left as a Generational Experience

There is little historical continuity and even less political sympathy among different generations of the American Left ... not only due

²⁰⁵ Diggins, John Patrick. The Rise and Fall of the American Left, page 40.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., pages 40-41.

to different values and attitudes but also profoundly different perceptions of reality and history.²⁰⁷

As a result, as each Left grows up and loses its belief that change is possible, it loses its power of negation, according to Diggins. Historically, this has caused each new Left to perhaps unfairly characterize the behavior of the last a "cop-out," as well as the old Left to call the new Left's activities those of a "nihilistic ego trip."²⁰⁸ Interestingly, the comments originally returned to me from the members of my committee noted my unfair hostility toward previous Lefts, particularly the New Left and the Hippie movement. After reflecting on the pattern in my work, I could only come to the conclusion that my attitude toward the previous Left was a result of this characterization of a generational experience. And again, I note the historical political significance of a generation's ability to articulate its own new vision for that which ought to exist. Defining a political vision is often half the battle in becoming a valid force.

Forming the Future

Punk clearly fits Diggins' interpretation of what the Left is and how it impacts society. I would go one step further and argue that Punk has been

²⁰⁷ Diggins, John Patrick. The Rise and Fall of the American Left, pages 41-

42.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., page 42.

one of the only countercultures since the Vietnam era to fit these criteria (I would also include the Rap and Hip-Hop countercultures).

One can only hope that the members of the Left and any progressive counterculture hold on to the utopian and transcendental ideals of their heyday and pass them on to their children and the next generation. And while that next generation will undoubtedly create their own unique vision for the future, this is indeed how change comes about and how society is forced to move forward to a better standard of living and way of life. Punk, like the Lefts and other progressives before it, has and continues to contribute significantly to the evolution of society in not settling for what is, by questioning normative values, by defining its own vision for a better future and in taking steps, both individually and collectively to move toward it.

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