Music as a Weapon

The Contentious Symbiosis of Punk Rock and Anarchism

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At the same time, it is crippling for a social movement aimed at transforming the whole of life to be associated with a single subculture. Learning from years of anarchist organizing rooted in the punk scene, we can see the importance of creating spaces that bring people from many backgrounds together on an equal footing. Likewise, we can learn from the factors that both produced and crippled punk, such as the love-hate relationship with rock stardom. Channeling desires fostered by capitalist society into resistance movements can produce swift growth, but also fatal flaws that only come to light over time.

Today, in the anarchist movement, we sometimes miss the Dionysian spirit that characterized the hardcore punk underground at its high point: the collective, embodied experience of dangerous freedom. This is how punk can inspire us in our anarchist experiments of today and tomorrow: as a transformative outlet for rage and grief and joy, a positive model for togetherness and self-determination in our social relations, an example of how the destructive urge can also be creative—and vice versa.

From Victor Jara to Public Enemy, music has played a pivotal role in countless cultures of resistance. A large proportion of those who participated in the anarchist movement between 1978 and 2010 were part of the punk counterculture at some point; indeed, many were first exposed to anarchist ideas via punk. This may have been merely circumstantial: perhaps the same traits that made people seek out anarchism also predisposed them to enjoy aggressive, independently produced music. But one could also argue that music that pushes aesthetic and cultural boundaries can open up listeners to a wider spectrum of possibility in other spheres of life as well.

Yet just as anarchism was coming into its own in the US around the turn of the century, radical activity in the domestic punk scene began a nosedive. Now that it is no longer possible to depend on the punk1 subculture as an incubator for anarchists, we should set out to understand how and why it served that role for thirty years.

Preface: When Punk Was a Recruiting Ground for Anarchy

> "People talk about 'preaching to the converted'—
> well who fucking converted them?"
>
> -Penny Rimbaud of Crass

There are countless reasons not to tie the fate of a revolutionary movement to the fortunes of a music scene. Coming into anarchism via punk, people tended to approach anarchist activity in the same way they would participate in a youth subculture. This contributed to an anarchist milieu characterized by consumerism rather than initiative, a focus on identity rather than

dynamic change, activities limited to the leisure time of the participants, ideological conflicts that boil down to disputes over taste, and an orientation towards youth that made the movement largely irrelevant upon the onset of adulthood.

Yet during the decades of global reaction that followed the 1960s, the punk underground was one of the chief catalysts of the renaissance of anarchism. Were it not for punk, anti-capitalists in many parts of the world might still be choosing between stale brands of authoritarian socialism.

Granted, the average punk show was as dominated by patriarchy as a college classroom. All the hierarchies, economics, and power dynamics of capitalist society were present in microcosm. And anarchism was not the only creed that utilized this soapbox: countless ideologies competed in the punk milieu, from Neo-Nazism to Christianity and Krishna "consciousness." But all this only makes it more striking that anarchist ideas fared so well, considering that they gained less purchase in other circles at the time.

We can attribute that success to structural factors. Many years before internet access became widespread, the do-it-yourself punk scene offered a rare model for horizontal and participatory activity. Organizing their own affairs in decentralized networks, participants experienced firsthand the benefits of leaderless autonomy. Once you've booked a tour yourself, sidestepping the monopoly of profiteering venues, record labels, and tour promoters, it's not hard to imagine organizing other aspects of your life in a similar way. At the same time, in a youth culture founded on opposition to authority, there were fewer built-in mechanisms to suppress radical ideas.

It's also possible that anarchist values took root in the punk scene precisely because they were so marginalized elsewhere: in an era when radical ideas were pushed to the periphery, peripheral subcultures teemed with them. This can create a feedback loop that keeps those ideas marginal, as they are not asso-

Punk had been exciting because, in contrast to corporate rock, it offered a relatively unmediated experience: one could meet one's favorite musicians, dance and interact outside the prescriptions of a repressive society, even form one's own band and remake the subculture itself. Thousands of people attended Black Flag shows because they offered a genuinely different experience than anything corporate capitalism had to offer. But once the internet made every band into its own promotions agency and youtube.com made it possible for everyone to appear on the equivalent of MTV, independent music was no less mediated than corporate music, and no less vapid.

Learning from Punk

Punk's long run as a breeding ground for anarchism shows how much we stand to gain from social activities that are pleasurable and creative. In nurturing organic cultural currents, we can create social movements that do not depend on any one institution but are naturally self-reproducing. Ideally, they should be subversive while not immediately provoking repression—it's important that the lines be drawn, but participants must have enough time to go through an evolutionary process before the police break out their batons. A sustainable space that nurtures long-term communities of resistance can ultimately contribute more to militant struggle than the sort of impatient insurrectionism that starts with confrontation rather than building to it.

As much as punk has been dismissed as insular, the success of anarcho-punk demonstrates how effective it can be for anarchists to invest themselves in ongoing outreach in a milieu of a manageable scale. All the better if it is a politically diverse space in which debate and dynamic change can occur and new people can encounter radical ideas.

yond their control. Rock stars are important precisely because not everyone can be one. Paradoxically, punks took up the rock format as a way of asserting their own importance, even in the process of rebelling against the corporations that introduced them to it.

One could read the rise and fall of DIY punk as the historical "hiccup" during which record-releasing and printing technology first became accessible to the general public. Crass was one of the first bands to release their own records; this was exciting because they were using technology that had been largely unavailable to the working class. Within a couple decades, however, this development was rendered moot by technological advances and oversaturation. Once *anyone* could release a record, it wasn't meaningful anymore—it wasn't "real" in the sense that everything on television is "real" while our lives feel unreal and insignificant.

The punk scene had been founded on the tensions created by limited access to the musical means of production; with the arrival of technologies that extended this access to everyone, its structures collapsed. The internet replaced painstakingly built distribution networks and zine cultures with the offhand immediacy of music downloading and blogs; some of this took place in genuinely decentralized structures, but more of it was based in corporate counterfeits such as myspace.com. The proliferation of the latter was particularly ironic in that the DIY underground had been a testing area for the sort of network-based systems that the internet universalized.

When every band of middle-class teenagers could have their own webpage and home recording studio, the ensuing disenchantment revealed how banal the promise of rock stardom had been in the first place. In some ways, it is healthy to be divested of one's illusions, especially the ones instilled by one's enemies. On the other hand, if nothing takes their place, this only drains the world of meaning even further—and pure nihilism helps maintain the status quo.

ciated with popular or successful initiatives. The romanticization of obscurity and failure that made punk hospitable terrain for revolutionary ideals in the 1980s did not encourage their new partisans to fight to win outside the punk ghetto.

But the self-imposed exile of the punk community was also an effective defense mechanism through an era of capitalist cooptation. The punk scene helped keep anarchist ideas alive between the 1970s and the 21st century in the same way that monasteries preserved science and literature through the Dark Ages. Although the demands and influence of the capitalist economy recreated the same power imbalances and materialism that punks had hoped to escape—limiting the punk critique of capitalism to a variant of the liberal maxim "buy local"— the anti-capitalist DIY underground displayed a remarkable resilience. In a cycle that became familiar, each generation expanded until profit-driven record labels skimmed the most popular apolitical bands off the top, setting the stage for a return to grassroots independence and experimentation. So the punk scene provided the music industry a free testing and development site for new bands and trends, but this process also served to cleanse it of parasites.

Far from MTV talent scouts, competing independent labels, and alternative consumerism, you could find something beautiful and free at the heart of the DIY underground. At best, it was a space in which the roles of protagonist and audience became interchangeable and the dictates of the dominant culture were shaken off.

Let's contrast this with the models of anarchist activity that are currently in vogue. While political activism often focuses on matters outside the daily lives of the participants, and thus tends to cost more energy than it generates, DIY punk was basically pleasure-oriented, offering activities that were fulfilling in and of themselves. Although this might appear frivolous, sociality and affirmation are as essential as food or housing. In some parts of the world, the punk scene was significantly more

working class and underclass than much of the current anarchist milieu; this may indicate that it provided for real needs, rather than catering to the middle class propensity for abstraction. In contrast to protests, which are often criticized as reactive, at its best punk emphasized creativity, demonstrating a concrete alternative. It was youth-oriented, yes; but as youth are among the most potentially rebellious and open to new ideas, this could be seen as an advantage. In focusing on self-expression, it enabled participants to build their confidence and experience in low-risk efforts, while producing a great deal of artwork that doubled as outreach material; as a decentralized cultural movement, it reproduced itself organically rather than through institutional efforts.

Were we to attempt to invent a cultural counterpart to contemporary activism that could replenish energy and propagate anarchist values among young people, we could do worse. Meme culture alone has considerably less to recommend it.

Anarchists often complained that in actuality, the punk scene was full of people with no regard for anarchist values. Unfortunately, if you want to introduce new people to anarchism, you're going to have to deal with a lot of people who are not anarchists. This is especially true in the United States, in which so few people grow up with any exposure to radical ideas at all. In Italy, by contrast, anarchist punks could say "Punk equals anarchy plus guitars and drums; anything less is just *submission.*"

There's a lot to be said for operating in diverse environments, in which the ideas of individuals and the culture that connects them are still evolving. Because the punk scene was not beholden to any rigid ideological framework, it offered a more fertile space for experimentation than many more explicitly radical milieus. Had this lesson been applied elsewhere—had anarchists initiated influential projects in other politically diverse, horizontal, network-based milieus—anarchist ideas might have spread further afield.

Technology, Legitimacy, and Accessibility

Let's return to the resurgence of folk punk shortly after the turn of the century. His Hero Is Gone had been one of the first DIY bands to shift from single speaker cabinets to full stacks, and within a few years every band that wished to be taken seriously had done the same. This led to an arms race and a sort of aesthetic inflation: no volume was loud enough, no recording powerful enough, no gear expensive enough.3 Folk punk was a reaction to this: an accessible, cheap, self-consciously unrefined format. Yet it never achieved the popularity of gear-based punk; tellingly, the flagship band Against Me! shifted to standard rock instrumentation in the course of their shift to corporate careerism.

Similarly, one might ask why, out of all the formats that flourished in the DIY underground, there were never any traveling drama troupes. On the face of it, theater would be the perfect medium for independent performers with limited access to resources. A drama troupe could travel without expensive equipment or need of a large vehicle; performances could take place practically anywhere. Dario Fo, the Living Theater… radical theater has had a rich history in every other nation and era. Puppet shows were practically a cliché on the DIY circuit—so why not drama?

This indicates a lingering materialism in DIY culture. Equipment, be it a shoddy cardboard puppet stage or ten thousand dollars' worth of amplifiers, conferred the legitimacy that both performers and audiences longed for. "Look," working class dropouts could say to themselves, gesturing at a rusty van full of gear that cost them years of wages, "we're a *real band!*"

In capitalist society, activities are invested with meaning primarily through the marketplace and the media. Rock music was originally a working class art form that came to be cultivated by capitalists as a cash crop; the meaning people find in it is real enough, but it is generated through forces largely be-

for music and fashion remained, and led a reaction against political engagement of all kinds. While others focused on anarchist convergences, black blocs, and accountability processes, the reactionaries were the ones still booking shows and recording albums, and they set the tone for an apolitical and musically conservative 21st century punk scene.

Between 1998 and 2002, nearly every band that had helped to politicize the punk underground broke up, and many influential magazines ceased publication. By May 2002, when Boston anarchists staged the Festival del Pueblo, a rupture had developed between the aesthetic and political elements in the subculture, evident in tensions between punks who only attended for the shows and anarchists striving to establish a revolutionary movement. To name a single example, the person who had booked the His Hero Is Gone show after Millions for Mumia and later played a role in anarchist organizing against the Republican National Convention of 2000 came to perform with his band, but headed home afterwards rather than attending the demonstration scheduled for the following day.

A few years later, the split between punk and anarchism was complete. Even Against Me!, the progenitors of the folk punk reaction to the stagnation of the anarcho-punk scene, had deserted the DIY movement and eschewed their former anarchist politics. From Ashes Rise, who had been colleagues of the uncompromisingly independent His Hero Is Gone, signed to a larger record label and recorded a final album with songs about nuclear war—a regression to 1980s nostalgia all the more absurd in the midst of the Iraq war—before breaking up. Punk—at least for that generation—had reached the end of its trajectory as a force for social change.

Though critics often accused the punk scene of being nothing more than a playpen for privileged First World consumers, punk has been integral in the resurgence of anarchist ideas far outside the US and Europe. While punk arguably originated in Britain and the US, a great proportion of the activity of the global punk underground took place in Latin America and the Pacific rim, not to mention South Africa, Israel, Australia, New Zealand, and the former Soviet bloc. In many of those nations, punk is still more overtly associated with radical politics than it has been in the United States; punk was especially instrumental in revitalizing anarchism in contexts in which there was no radical alternative to Marxist hegemony. It would be instructive to examine why punk took root in nations like Brazil, Malaysia, and the Philippines but not India or most Arabic-speaking nations, and study how this correlates with the spread of anarchist ideas over the past thirty years.

Punk and Resistance: A Trajectory

The first major wave of politicized punk can probably be traced to the British band Crass, which drew on Dadaism and other avant-garde traditions to fashion early punk rock into a form of cultural agitprop. Decades later, a visitor to Britain could find small circles of middle-aged anarcho-punks who had been politicized by Crass still participating in the same independent music underground and resuming the same arguments about The Clash whenever they got drunk.

In the United States, over a decade later, the DIY underground of the mid-1990s contributed to an increase in animal rights activism and helped pave the way for the anti-globalization movement. Magazines such as *Profane Existence* introduced radical perspectives on everything from feminism to firearms; DIY communities developed in which everyone wrote a zine, played in a band, or hosted basement shows; even

in the most macho scenes, every band addressed the audience between songs—if only, in some cases, to urge people to dance more violently.

On the eve of the debut of the anti-globalization movement,2 hundreds of punks gathered in Philadelphia late in April 1999 for Millions for Mumia, a march to deter the state of Pennsylvania from executing Mumia Abu-Jamal. For many, it was the first time they had traveled out of town for a protest; likewise, though no major conflict took place with the police, it was the first time most of them had assembled publicly in black masks and sweatshirts. This moment, in which politicized punks realized that there were enough of them to constitute a social force, set the stage for everything that came after; a year later, many of the participants fought shoulder to shoulder at the demonstrations against the IMF/World Bank meeting of April 2000 in Washington, DC. The night following the march, a standing-room-only crowd assembled at Stalag 13, a local DIY venue, to see His Hero Is Gone; there was a feeling in the air that there was no real distinction between subcultural identity and political activity. That same year, the Primate Freedom Tour achieved a synthesis of punk music and radical activism, using a series of shows around the country to promote regional demonstrations against laboratories experimenting on primates.

The DIY boom of the mid-1990s fed into the momentum of the anti-globalization movement. Those who had been in or around punk bands already understood how an affinity group worked; operating in decentralized networks and coordinating autonomous actions came naturally. It was easy for people who routinely traveled across the country to engage in rowdy subcultural events to shift to traveling across the country to participate in rowdy anti-capitalist demonstrations. So-called "summit-hopping" offered many of the same inducements as punk—risk, excitement, togetherness, opportunities to be cre-

ative and oppose injustice—along with the additional attraction of feeling that you were on the front lines of history.

In the period leading up to this explosion of political activity, punk music and culture had become more experimental as punks sought to match daring aesthetics to radical rhetoric. There had always been a tension in punk between the folk art aspects of the craft—three-chord musical progressions and hand-drawn layouts—and the desire to innovate and challenge. As the subculture offered participants broader conceptions of what could be possible, they began to play music and make demands that strained against the limitations of the medium. On one hand, innovative music could make radical ideas more compelling: following an unfamiliar yet exhilarating experience, a listener might be more likely to believe that an entirely different world was possible. On the other hand, this experimentation contributed to the fragmentation of the punk subculture, as traditions were abandoned and the standards for musicianship and creativity reached prohibitive heights.

Volatile phenomena eventually break into their constituent elements and stabilize. The Swedish band Refused, for example, who had combined hardcore, techno, jazz, and classical music on their final album, split asunder in 1998, and the members went on to form much more traditional bands according to their individual tastes—none of which were nearly as interesting as Refused. Once there was an anarchist movement for the most politicized punks to join, a similar process occurred within the punk scene. Until 1999, politicized punks tended to stick around the DIY underground, as there was usually no larger revolutionary milieu to move on to; playing music and writing zines were seen as political activity, despite the narrow horizons of the subculture. All that changed after the 1999 WTO protests, which kicked off an era of non-stop demonstrations and political organizing. Most of the people who were serious about their politics shifted focus away from the punk scene. Meanwhile, the people who were involved in punk only