SCREAMING FOR CHANGE

ARTICULATING A UNIFYING PHILOSOPHY OF PUNK ROCK

LARS J. KRISTIANSEN, JOSEPH R. BLANEY, PHILIP J. CHIDESTER, AND BRENT K. SIMONDS

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Chapter 1

WHY A REVISION OF PUNK?

The year 2007 marked the thirtieth anniversary of the "subcultural" movement commonly referred to as punk (punk rock is the movement's musical expression), at least if the Sex Pistols' seminal record "Never Mind the Bollocks" is used as a definitive starting point. Researchers from various fields of academia have investigated the phenomenon (e.g., Bennet, 2006; Davies, 1996; Garnett, 1999; Goshert, 2000; Graffin, 2007; Grossberg, 1986; Hebdige, 1979; Herman & Sloop, 1998; Huxley; 1999, Lydon, Zimmerman & Zimmerman, 1994; Matula, 2007; McKay, 1998, 1999; McLoone, 2004; Moore, 2004; Muggleton, 2000; O'Hara, 1999; Phillipov, 2006; Redhead, 1990; Sabin, 1999a, 1999b; Savage, 2001; Simonelli, 2002; Sinker, 1999; Spicer, 2006; Taylor, 2003; Wood, 2006), and punk is arguably the most studied "subculture" to ever launch itself onto the larger social agenda as a possible counterbalance to the mainstream cultural hegemony.

During the late 1970s, punk scenes sprouted up in large numbers all over the globe, and it appears that deep feelings of discontent toward the inherent alienation present in the capitalist system were the motivational seed that facilitated their growth. Postwar England saw unemployment lines spread wildly, and ranks of people gathered in dole queues on street corners everywhere sincerely hoping to find employment. People were angry, young, and poor, and the prosperous narrative offered by the British government stood in stark contrast to the lived experience of the country's workers: England was trapped in a contemporary state of affairs that demanded imminent reaction (Hebdige, 1979; Savage, 2001; Simonelli, 2002). It was, however, surprising that this reaction would present itself in the form of musically charged social protest orchestrated by four

disenfranchised adolescents hanging around Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren's fashion boutique on King's Road.

A Brief Introduction to the Problem—A Theoretical Rationale

Unconvinced that historical accounts—many of which are referenced above—have been successful in adequately describing and proficiently capturing the essence of punk, this study examines the phenomenon in slightly different terms. Where historical accounts largely have been launched down one of three distinctly separate trajectories—(1) punk is a subculture, (2) punk is a musical genre, or (3) punk is an authentic cultural expression—this study proposes that punk should be understood as a way of seeing the world, as a way of reasoning, or, essentially, as a philosophy on its own terms. Rather than being grounded in musical properties, a certain style of dress, or even a way of life, it will be argued that punk deals mainly with concepts and ideas, and it should, therefore, be treated accordingly. Hence, it is argued that all the observable attributes that academics have previously examined are mere visual and audible manifestations of an underlying punk philosophy.

In attempting to provide evidence for such claims, this study analyzes punk texts from across decades and geographical spaces, utilizing a combination of ideological rhetorical criticism and Gramscian notions of hegemony. Expectantly, results will support the articulation of a unifying philosophy of deviance—a set of ideas that precede the easily observable stylistic, musical, and behavioral manifestations that people have understood as punk. Finally, the goal of this study is not necessarily to generalize findings, but rather to determine whether rhetorical treatment of the selected artifacts allows for articulation of a unifying punk philosophy, or minimally, identification of some common thought patterns.

Punk History

Punks have been archenemies of good taste and public decency for the better part of three decades, and they have shown resilience and stark determination in their fight against the social, political, economic, and cultural practices of the status quo. In fact, punk was a fresh start, and it functioned as a new way of creating, consuming, and experiencing art. Proving itself worthy of life in a modern world, it rapidly caught on. During the late 1970s, punk gained widespread media attention for its deviant call to arms—using sacred mainstream symbols as ammunition in its self-proclaimed class war—and the punk movement rapidly

gained momentum. To this day, punks can be found almost everywhere. Inhabitants of metropolitan areas and small towns all over the world have come to recognize the punk expression by its characteristic visual and musical features. Mohawks, tattoos, tight jeans, and leather jackets are still flown by punks marching their mission toward freedom, emancipation, and justice for all, as symbolic flags of individuality.

Even though punk in many ways has become an easily identifiable cultural expression, its underlying motivations and its overarching cultural undertakings are still somewhat diffuse. Scholars from different academic specializations have offered insight into punk's properties, but the generalizability, or even correctness, of these accounts are questionable. There are several reasons why this uncertainty exists, and they are all ultimately tied to definitional concerns. Sabin (1999a) suggests that "until we decide what punk was, it is impossible to say what its consequences were" (p. 5). For now, it will suffice to say that this study removes focus from punk's visual and musical attributes and refocuses it on punk's intellectual properties. Thus, punk will, in the following, be seen as an oppositional philosophical framework with its own idiosyncratic ideology that is geared toward social change. In order to achieve such ends, some background is needed; the following paragraphs therefore devote attention to punk's history from its early stages of development until the present day.

The Beginnings

Pinpointing punk's historical and geographical birthplace is a dubious task, and even in academic circles, discussion regarding its place of origin is still debated (Savage, 2001). Controversy also exists regarding punk's importance, influence, and continued survival (Davies, 1996; Hebdige, 1979; Goshert, 2000; Grossberg, 1986; Phillipov, 2006; Sabin, 1999a; Simonelli, 2002; Wood, 2006). On the topic of origin, however, some consensus does exist, and scholars *typically* have ascribed to one of two different approaches: (1) punk originated in the United States, or (2) punk is a British phenomenon. As should be expected, there are exceptions to this rule. Not satisfied with the constricting nature of these approaches, historian Jon Savage (2001) entertained the idea of punk as a global oppositional phenomenon that emerged as a response to specific social, political, and economic conditions that were present in most western capitalist societies during the mid-to-late 1970s. To back up his claim, Savage explains that bands with similar musical expressions and political ideas emerged at the same time in England, USA, and Australia. Scandinavian countries such as Finland, Norway, and Sweden also harbored bands that would fit the emerging punk category.

Thus, in taking a more dynamic approach, this study collapses the three historical approaches into one continuous timeline, and it is argued that the punk sound was created in America, perfected (or corrupted) in Britain, and subsequently disseminated to the world. That is, the punk sound sprung out of the

American garage rock scene, its oppositional politics were attached to the musical expression as a reaction to the contradictions inherent in the British class system, and the global presence of punk is a direct result of its ability to resonate with deeply felt emotions of discontent existent worldwide. Differing accounts, therefore, should not present too many problems, as the different scenes are conceptually interconnected, and they all offer similar ideological content.

Still, the brand of punk that exists today will, in the following, be treated largely as a British invention because before the introduction of oppositional politics, punk did not exercise a great deal of social influence. Simonelli (2002) sheds light on this debate when arguing that the original American punk scenes sprung out of boredom and that they served only as a means to escape the increasingly monotonous submissiveness of lives structured and erected on a foundation of consumerist ideals. American punk, or proto-punk, therefore functioned as a musical means to a specific end, namely, having fun by breaking up the externally imposed passivity of suburban life. Punk was an attack on the increasing dullness of the daily grind.

However, the British punk explosion was a joint effort of art-school sensibilities mixed with genuine class struggle in an attempt to bring about social change. In summation, the American pre/proto-punk "movement" was anchored in fun whereas the British punk movement rested upon ideals of social change.

Historical Definitions of Punk

Spicer (2006) explains that several meanings have been attributed to the term punk over the course of history and that its shifting definitional content has referred to an assortment of different material and immaterial entities, objects, behaviors, and groups. An overall common characteristic, however, is that the word "punk" has consistently carried unappealing negative connotations; the Merriam-Webster dictionary displays various meanings that range from sexual deviancy to prostitution and severe inexperience. Although the Merriam-Webster dictionary is unable to provide an etymologic origin for the word "punk," it is likely that the term originated in Britain sometime during the late 1500s or the early 1600s, where it denoted whore or prostitute. In fact, Shakespeare used the term in his play *Measure for Measure* to illustrate how an unmarried woman was perceived to be a prostitute based on her failure to conform to the expected gender roles and conventions of her time: "[My Lord,] she may be a punk; for many of them are neither maid, widow, nor wife" (quoted in Spicer, 2006, p. 3).

However, punk took a definitional turn when it entered the shores of America. During the 1700s, it was used as a description for slow-burning rotten wood or fungus, which, when dry, could be used as tinder (Spicer, 2006). Punk, in this context, was a measure of an object's general lack of worth and quality, in the sense that punk objects were believed to be cheap, worthless, or even rubbishy.

More recently, punk has frequented the United States prison system, where it has been used as a label for passive homosexuals and victims of male-on-male sex crimes. In elaborating this claim, Spicer explains that in the correctional system, punks are on the receiving end of involuntary homosexual intercourse and are, in essence, prison rape victims. This definition further led to understandings of punks as petty criminals, deviants, ruffians, gangsters, or hoodlums; consequently, these understandings made their way into popular television programming and Hollywood films as demeaning and derogatory characterizations of people on the wrong side of the law. Indeed, the term was notably used in the well-known Clint Eastwood movie *Dirty Harry*, where the main character, having chased down the criminal, goes into the following monotonous monologue:*I know what you're thinking punk: you're thinking, did he fire six shots or only five? Well to tell you the truth I forgot myself in all this excitement. But being as this is a .44 Magnum, the most powerful handgun in the world, and [that it] will blow your head clean off, you've got to ask yourself a question: do I feel lucky? Well, do ya, punk?*

Similar usage of the term "punk" can also be found in other cop and detective shows, such as *Kojak* and *Beretta*. Upon arresting the criminal, these cops and detectives would normally say, "you dirty Punk" (Savage, 2001, p. 131). As seems evident, punk is far from a compliment paid to law-abiding citizens, but rather a derogatory label reserved for social outcasts threatening the "natural" order of things. In fact, punk's definitional content took a drastic turn when scores of young people everywhere embraced it as an empowering semantic talisman in their quest for total self debasement. The intriguing aspect, however, is that punks did not try to re-appropriate the term—their mission was to scare the establishment by becoming the deviants that respectable members of society feared and despised—and the derogatory nature of the term remained intact.

Punk continues to exist as a synonym for social, cultural, and political deviancy. However, the punks' underlying motivations for embracing the term stems from a deep desire to state their discontent with society's power structures, particularly the lower-status social groups' lack of power to partake in the process of defining and labeling social entities, which consequently, resulted in punks becoming the prophesized "monster" society itself had created. Punk, then, is a celebratory expression of lower-class belongingness—or belongingness to a marginalized group—rather than a derogatory term reflecting its subcultural participants' degree of lawfulness or sexual preferences. At least, this seems true during punk's initial stages.

Punk in the Music Press

How the term punk eventually made its way into music journalism is somewhat uncertain. As is often the case, historical accounts differ and absolute certainty is difficult to establish. Savage (2001) explains that up until 1975, nobody had

been able to agree on a proper name for the emerging musically-driven high-energy movement, and some people, like Hilly Kristal, the owner of CBGB, had for that reason only referred to it as Street Rock. In Savage's account, punk was coined later that winter by two high school friends—Legs McNeil and John Holmstrom from Cheshire, Connecticut—who wanted to name their new music fanzine *Punk* before anyone else snatched the name. However, McNeil and Holmstrom's magazine was first published in 1975 and that leaves out some important background information.

Nick Tosches, of the music magazines *Fusion* and *Creem*, did in fact use the term as early as 1970 when he wrote the essay *"The Punk Muse: The True Story of Protopathic Spiff Including the Lowdown on the Trouble-Making Five-Percent of America's Youth."* Tosches described a music that was a "visionary expiation, a cry into the abyss of one's own mordant bullshit," and suggested that its "poetry is puked, not plotted." However, punk, in Tosches' account, did not necessarily refer exclusively to music, and Dave Marsh has been credited for being the first person to put punk and rock together. Marsh used the phrase "punk rock" in his *Looney Tunes* column in the May 1971 issue of *Creem* to describe the music of *? and the Mysterians* (incidentally, this was the same issue that introduced the world to the term "heavy metal"). Marsh wrote, "culturally perverse from birth, I decided that this insult would be better construed as a compliment, especially given the alternative to such punkist behavior, which I figured was acting like a dignified asshole."

DeRogatis (2000) further explains that "Tosches, Bangs, Marsh, Richard Meltzer, Greg Shaw and Lenny Kaye used the term to define a canon of proto-punk bands, including the Velvets, Stooges, MC5, the Modern Lovers and the New York Dolls" (pp. 118-119). The scattered nature of the term's usage makes it difficult to pinpoint its exact origins, and Spicer (2006), therefore, suggests that the label "punk rock" might as well be credited to Dave Marsh and his 1971 essay.

Punk Rock—A Definitional Nightmare

Although the introduction of the punk term has been located within its historical context, only one part of the puzzle is completed. The second part is that of defining punk rock. This, however, has proven problematic, as scholars have offered very different ideas when arguing about what really counts as punk rock. Moreover, the separation between punk and punk rock has been largely disregarded, and the whole debate has developed into a jumble of different ideas relating to all of punk's conceptual elements. That is, punk and punk rock have come to carry similar, possibly even synonymous, meanings, and they both relate to subcultural practices, musical orchestration, and oppositional ideas. It is, therefore, necessary to develop an agreed upon conceptual vocabulary that ad-

dresses punk's specific components. Sabin (1999a) has expressed similar concerns and, after explaining that the act of defining is the grim duty of any writer of introductions, goes on to suggest that

> At a very basic level, we can say that punk was/is a subculture best characterized as part youth rebellion, part artistic statement. It had its high point from 1976 to 1979, and was most visible in Britain and America. It had its primary manifestation in music—and specifically in the disaffected rock and roll bands like the Sex Pistols and the Clash. Philosophically, it had no "set agenda" like the hippy movement that preceded it, but nevertheless stood for identifiable attitudes, among them: an emphasis on negationism (rather than nihilism); a consciousness of class-based politics (with a stress on "working-class credibility"); and a belief in spontaneity and "doing it yourself" (pp. 2-3).

Phillipov (2006, pp. 383-384) notes that although Sabin's anthology is perceived as a "radical departure from 'orthodox' punk scholarship (which focuses primarily on music and fashion) toward a more comprehensive location of punk in cultural history," the attempt fails in that it eventually relocates it within the realm of cultural studies. Punk's musical properties have been forced into the backseat by scholars who deem punk's political aspects more important. Phillopov, then, argues for the study of punk as a musical genre, and her views are shared by Davies (1996), who suggests that punks should be treated as producers of musical texts within a given genre. However, this perspective too is problematic in the sense that generic boundaries are difficult to impose on a dynamic musical expression that is designed to escape classification. The problem, presumably, can be escaped by introducing a new vocabulary that focuses on the perceived authenticity of individual members of different punk communities. Grossberg (1986), Muggleton (2000), and O'Connor (2002), among others, have taken this approach. This perspective, however, does not solve problems relating to subcultural practice but rather addresses how punk can respond to the postmodern condition.

Others have defined punk in slightly different terms. For example, Goshert (2000) and O'Connor (2002) have argued for a local approach to punk, expressing concerns that grand all-encompassing definitions are truly un-punk. Further, Graffin (2007), a scholar from the field of evolutionary biology, has approached punk from a socio-biological perspective. Graffin provides a dynamic overview of punk thought and practice, and he presents five characteristics that, taken together, merge into an overarching punk definition. First, punk is the "personal expression of uniqueness that comes from the experiences of growing up in touch with our human ability to reason and ask questions" (§ 9). Second, punk is "a movement that serves to refute social attitudes that have been perpetuated through willful ignorance of human nature" (§ 16). Third, punk is "a process of questioning and commitment to understanding that results in self-progress, and by extrapolation, could lead to social progress" (§ 24). Fourth, punk is "a belief

that this world is what we make of it, truth comes from our understanding of the way things are, not from the blind adherence to prescriptions about the way things should be" (§ 30). Finally, punk is "the constant struggle against fear of social repercussions" (§ 42). Graffin opens up punk to be viewed as an intellectual entity based on individuality and personal perception. Punk, in this view, is a way of seeing and experiencing the world. His argument is compatible with the one constructed in the following, and these views will be thoroughly explicated in subsequent chapters.

Commodified Punk Rock vs. Underground Punk Rock

A further problem with many historical accounts is the lack of sample diversity and the problem of analyzing bands and texts that have already been labeled as punk by the mainstream media (Goshert, 2000). Well-known "punk bands" are likely to be nothing more than rock bands, as co-optation almost certainly looms in the background. Spicer (2006) remarks that "over the years 'punk rock' as a term has become diffused and devalued through being applied to every little gang of snot-nosed rockers to be hailed as the next new thing" and that it "has been overused by journalists, while fans looking for the real deal have been ripped off by the record companies who flood the market with a dozen discs awash with rubbish, but wearing the 'punk tag'" (p. iv).

O'Hara (1999) explains that the punk legacy has been watered down by the media in order to defang the beast and that media misrepresentation has been instrumental in shaping the publicly agreed upon definition of punk. Graffin (2007) further argues "because it is so easy for record companies to sell images of violence, sex, and self-importance, many bands have taken the bait and portrayed themselves as Punks, without realizing that they were actually perpetuating a stereotype of conformity that is wholly un-punk" (§ 44).

Further problems are encountered when punk branches off into smaller subgenres. There are numerous types of punk rock, and the umbrella term "punk" is mainly used to express conceptual linkage between the different forms. However, the similarities shared by these punk rock offshoots are greater than their dissimilarities. Therefore, they can be seen as connected at the deep structural level, since they are closer to each other than they are to musical genres accepted, marketed, and sold by the mainstream within the hegemonic cultural apparatus. They serve as subtle color differences to an overall sinister shade of deviance.

Attempting a New Definition, or Rather, a Description

The different historical definitions have enabled arguments to follow somewhat predictable patterns, and punk scholarship has, for that reason, generally been launched down one of three distinctly separate trajectories: (1) punk is a subcul-

ture; (2) punk is a musical genre; or (3) punk is an authentic lived experience. Although these approaches do have their theoretical merit—several useful conclusions and observations have been made by scholars adhering to these theoretical positions—the current argument is that the presented approaches have failed to satisfactorily define and describe punk in its totality and that these accounts have been ineffectual in capturing the essence of punk. In fact, the tendency seems to suggest that scholars have chosen a fragment of the punk expression and focused exclusively on only one of the three different conceptual attributes. Punk, as will be argued, is comprised of three major conceptual building blocks that when taken together, converge into a complete and coherent social and intellectual phenomenon; punk is an amalgamated fusion of forms synthesized into a distinguishable social and intellectual experience.

First, punk is a way of observing the world. It is a distinctive political mindset geared toward social change, communal progress, and betterment of the human condition. Second, punk is an intentionally loud and abrasive musical expression that is unappealing to the masses of society. Finally, punk is a subcultural experience lived out close to the margins of society (the problem of authenticity versus co-optation will be covered in detail in the next chapter). The important distinction here, as opposed to other punk studies, is that the first category is necessary whereas the other two are preferable or desirable. The current study sets out to illustrate how punk is best understood as a philosophy and not as a musical genre or a subcultural lived experience. This is not to deny that punk subcultures exist or that there is such a thing as punk rock, rather, it is to suggest that these expressions are the observable manifestations of an oppositional philosophical system.

Musical Roots—Garage Rock, Proto-Punk, Punk Rock, and Beyond

The remainder of this chapter focuses on punk's musical roots and evolution; an outline tracing punk's musical influences and practices from its humble beginnings to its current incarnation is presented in the following. Punk is followed from its early affiliations with the garage rock movement that plagued the U.S. like a musical pandemic, through its pre-political proto-punk stage, through the British explosion in the 1970s, and, subsequently, through every decade leading up to the present day.

Punk's Garage Rock Roots

As was suggested in earlier paragraphs, punk's initial musical expression was highly influenced by the new and primitive distortion drenched rock sound that