Interpreting Punk Rock
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(The author wrote Sound of our Time (1969) and his forthcoming book is entitled An Introduction to the Marxist Theory of Art.)

During the 1960s, popular music underwent a qualitative change, through the work of The Beatles, Bob Dylan and their successors. This new and ambitious music was closely associated with the various youth and "counter-cultural" movements of the decade which with varying degrees of clarity opposed aspects of advanced capitalist society.1 But, by 1970, very little remained of this "rock revolution". According to the former Beatle John Lennon, the dream was over. For all the advocacy of alternative life-styles and Utopian idealism, the power structure remained intact.

One of the few marxist accounts of this decline suggested that it was the success of the music and the "cultural revolt of proletarian youth" which explained the impasse in which it found itself. On the sexual and cultural front, in opposition to the authoritarianism of the family and school, the battle had largely been won. But the "latent general rejection of a complete life-situation" (which the writer considered to be concealed within the cultural revolt) could "only be released into consciousness by the passage to politics proper. Nothing guarantees that British pop music will make this transition. Its eclipse will perhaps already be visible tomorrow."2

The first half of the 1970s seemed to justify this pessimism. Most of the dominant trends in pop music showed a regression from the achievements of the 1960s. At one pole was the exploitative "teenybopper" music, purveyed by well-drilled "idols" for pubescent children. At the other, the experimental musicians of the 1960s adopted a pretentious and apolitical stance of "artistic quality" which usually meant the use of electronic instruments and poetic verses about elves or spaceships. In between were the empty bombast of "heavy rock" and what came to be called "glam-rock". This genre was a curious mixture of apocalyptic imagery and a kind of "Orwellian" social criticism, epitomised in the erratic career of David Bowie and his fascination with the paradoxes of stardom.3

The stylised extremism of Bowie and others was an influence on the style of the earliest practitioners of punk rock, who emerged during 1976. But in general, punk rock was a negation of those dominant trends in popular music. It contained attitudes, approaches and subject-matter that had been excluded from the practice of popular music, which by the mid-1970s was more than ever dominated by a small group of multi-national conglomerates (EMI, CBS, RCA, WEA-Kinney, Philips-Polydor) and their control of the manufacture and distribution of records.

The unity of punk rock as a phenomenon lay in this external relation to pre-existing popular music, and in the shock tactics with which its exponents went about their work. Internally, however, punk rock was intensely contradictory, a fact masked by the eagerness with which the media and the music industry presented it as the latest musical craze. In analysing punk from a marxist viewpoint it is important to avoid the temptation simply to be for it (because it's rebellious) or against it (because it's decadent or sexist). Frequently, both progressive and reactionary elements appear in the work of the same musician, sometimes in the same song. In this article, I want to try to disentangle these contradictory aspects of punk rock, as well as analyse its impact on popular music as a whole, and to discuss the question of the "social base" of the phenomenon.

Political Themes

Before moving on to those issues, I should briefly describe punk as a musical genre, and give some indication of its impact. Probably the most striking aspect of the phenomenon, for marxists, is its introduction of political subject-matter into rock music. Although "protest" songs were a strong feature of folk music during the early 1960s, and a few of the folk-rock songs of the era dealt with war or civil rights, the radicalism of the "rock

1 On this topic, see Martin Jacques, "Trends In Youth Culture", Marxism Today, September 1973.
3 This brief list necessarily omits less popular trends that represented progressive developments, notably reggae and singer-songwriters like Joni Mitchell, Paul Simon and Carole King.
revolution” seldom involved direct reference to current political matters: it remained steadfastly cultural.

Punk groups, however, have produced songs about unemployment (Career Opportunities, Right To Work), the Notting Hill carnival (White Riot), the monarchy (God Save The Queen) and general expressions of an apocalyptic rebellion (Anarchy In The UK, London’s Burning). Since many of these songs have not been broadcast as a result of formal or covert censorship, it is worth dealing in some detail with the most prominent of them.

God Save The Queen was released as a recording by the Sex Pistols at the height of last year’s Jubilee euphoria. In a harsh, staccato style, the song expressed a cynical and critical view of the monarchy. The words veered from overstatement calculated to outrage (“God save the Queen/And her fascist regime/Made you a moron/A potential H-bomb”) to succinct irony (“God save the Queen/Cos tourists are money”). The song ends on the repeated line “No future in England’s dreaming”, an accurate diagnosis of the surfeit of regressive nostalgia involved in the whole Jubilee process.

The phrase “N.F.—No Future” was later taken up in anti-fascist propaganda, while a National Front publication described Sex Pistols’ singer Johnny Rotten as a “gormless ethno-masochist”. Rotten, whose real name is John Lydon, was born in London of Irish parents. Despite radio censorship, and the refusal of multiple retailers such as Boots and W. H. Smith to stock it, the record sold over 200,000 copies and featured in the hit parade. The abnormal, “underground” conditions which surrounded it must have added to the attention with which the record was heard by those who managed to acquire a copy. The whole episode was probably the most effective political intervention by a song since the “protest” era. It’s worth noting also that the choice of the same title as the national anthem was an especially effective blow against ruling class propaganda. The subversive parody of such material has a long history.

Characteristics of Punk Rock

The word “punk” was an American slang term describing certain groups of youths at the bottom of the social scale, such as hoboes and black homosexual convicts. It gradually took on a more general derisive meaning, which was softened through time. A British equivalent might be the word “bugger”. Within music, it was first applied to a school of teenage rock music in America inspired by the style of the British groups led by The Beatles and The Rolling Stones. Later it was attached to another brash trend centered on New York and influenced by David Bowie and others in its use of sensationalism. The title was finally given to the new British groups by journalists who thought they had spotted key similarities between those musicians and the New Yorkers. During the early stages of punk’s brief history there was an attempt to rechristen the genre "new wave” and thus make it more assimilable to the pre-existing popular music structures. The term was appropriate to a few groups whose style was predominantly a return to the “youth revolt” mode of the 1960s (e.g. The Jam), but it obscured the hostility to the status quo which fuelled the major part of punk rock.

That hostility took three major forms: a challenge to the "capital-intensive" production of music within the orbit of the multi-nationals, a rejection of the ideology of "artistic excellence" which was influential among established musicians, and the aggressive injection of new subject-matter into popular song, much of which (including politics) had previously been taboo.

The capital-intensive nature of recording has resulted from the development of sophisticated technology in recording studios during the last decade. The manipulation of that technology has become accepted as the pre-condition for successful and competent recorded music. Access to these means of production is dependent on the ability to lay out considerable sums of money to pay for the making of a record. The musician is therefore very much in the hands of those possessing such funds, who are predominantly the large record companies. Under most recording contracts, the heavy costs of recording are paid for out of the musician’s royalties.

This state of affairs has been underwritten by the aesthetic of artistic excellence already referred to. Dissatisfied with their status as "entertainers", many of the musicians with roots in the music of 1960s took on the stance of "artistes”. With a complex and highly detailed recording as their "work of art”. But the key feature of this stream of "progressive rock”, as it was originally and misleadingly named, is a grandiloquent emphasis on size. Groups spend months perfecting the minutiae of recorded sound, and then invest in expensive sound reproduction equipment to enable to present a note-perfect copy of the recording in live concerts, which increasingly have the sole function of advertising the disc itself.

The result, not surprisingly, has been that a major effect of such music is a celebration of its own opulence and grandeur. It frequently becomes a hymn to the age of the multi-nationals, notwithstanding the lyrics about goblins or outer space. Very few musicians have mastered the new technological means, rather than being mastered by it. The earlier work of lOcC and the more recent Pink
Floyd records are examples of the use of such materials to focus on social themes rather than asocial ones.

Punk records initially marked a sharp break with this whole trend. Typically, they were made quickly and cheaply in a small recording studio, often in the group's home city rather than in London. They were manufactured and distributed locally through a company set up by a manager or local entrepreneur, such as a record shop owner. In Manchester, punk groups have made use of the organisational expertise of Music Force, a co-operative set up by local musicians as an alternative to the control of middlemen like managers, agents and promoters over live performances.

This development did not, of course, solve the problem of reaching a national audience outside the network of distribution controlled by the multi-nationals and other large record companies. Indeed, in some instances the local records have acted as stepping-stones to contracts with the major companies. Nevertheless, this is not necessarily a "defeat", since punk groups with this background may well be ideologically equipped to continue a productive struggle within the structures of the music industry.

A further aspect of this "do-it-yourself" element in punk rock has been the proliferation of "fan-zines" devoted to the music. These duplicated magazines are produced by small groups of listeners to the music to express their own response to punk and to criticise the accounts of it provided by the commercial music press. These journals are very uneven in character, but the best of them indicate the existence of an active and involved audience for punk rock, in contrast to the passivity and simple acceptance required of its listeners by mainstream popular music.

Style and Subject Matter

The musical forms adopted by punk rock are similarly contrasted to those of the technological styles described above. Instrumentally, it presents itself as direct and straightforward, in a clear line from the so-called "classic" style of rock 'n' roll in the 1950s. A limited range of chords are employed and a heavy rhythmic emphasis replaces concern for melody and improvisation. One punk song is called I Never Went To Music School. The singing style rejects both the rather colourless clarity of progressive rock and the various "white soul" modes typified by Mick Jagger or Rod Stewart, modes adapted from genres of black music. Instead, there is an apparently artless "natural" vocal approach, which, on close inspection, turns out to have roots in the cockney-novelty singing of Anthony Newley and David Bowie, but also, via Slade, in the chanting of football fans.

This vocal style is, perhaps, the most significant innovation of punk rock at the level of musical sound, since its effect is to represent within a public communications medium a form of expression which previously was merely the object of media reproach ("obscene" chants at football matches, etc.). Of course, the singing of Johnny Rotten or The Clash's Joe Strummer is not a direct reflection of the terraces. In the transition to the recording studio a transformation occurs. But now, within popular music a working-class voice is possible beyond the comic novelty of character actors. There are parallels to this process elsewhere in the arts, in the Scottish comedy of Billy Connolly and in Barry Hines' Yorkshire dramatic writing (Kes, The Price of Coal). Bourgeois hegemony in the cultural sphere works through tone of voice (Standard English and its musical-vocal equivalents) as well as through the dissemination of specific ideas (indeed, the former help to legitimate the latter). The struggle to establish alternative ways of speaking in the media should not be underestimated.

If vocally, punk represents an advance within the musical field, its instrumental ethos is more doubtful. In the years since the introduction of the classic rock 'n' roll style, this form has become mythologised as signifying a pure, simple and innocent rebellion or release of strong emotion, unhindered by social or political complexities. Thus, the Rolling Stones, who on every other criterion must rank as reactionaries, are given an alibi because they are still the (nostalgic) personification of "rock 'n' roll energy". Historically, however, this energy has usually taken an aggressive form, and since the Rolling Stones and other rock bands focused primarily on sexuality, the aggression was usually sexual and sexist in character. The implications of all this for a progressive (and especially feminist) use of the rock 'n' roll style are unclear. Is the style synonymous with its past meanings (machismo, denigration of women), or is it a neutral arrangement of sound to take on new meaning in a different practice of music?

Punk rock has proved to be a sort of laboratory in which possible solutions to questions like these can be glimpsed, for it characteristically combines the rock 'n' roll musical ethos with subject-matter which is broadly sexual or political. The result has been a whole range of ideological effects. Much of the work of The Stranglers, for example, merely extends the machismo aspect of the music, while apparently being more "realistic" in its lyrics (to this extent this group is very similar to the early Rolling Stones, whose songs of male domination were praised for "exposing the reality" behind the
facade of sentimentality purveyed by other songs). On the other hand, a purely political song like God Save The Queen redirects the aggressive energy from a sexual to a political target. And, even more powerfully, Oh Bondage Up Yours! by X-Ray Specs (with a woman singer and writer) redirects the aggression within the space of the song itself. The verses alternate between an apparent hymn to the delights of bondage as a sexual activity and an attack on social bondage, with the title line becoming a cry of liberation.

Much has been made of the concentration of punk rock on bizarre sexuality in its songs and its styles of dress. But it is crucial to distinguish between these things in themselves, and the social significance they possess. Punk is overwhelmingly concerned with the latter, in bringing it to the surface and, usually, mocking it. For these "deviations" are not so much excluded from ordinary social and media discourse, but repressed by it. In this relationship of repression, the apparent opposites of the puritan sexual ethic and pornography reinforce each other through the fascination exerted on the former by the forbidden.

In general, the punk attitude works to expose the mutual dependence of the concepts of normality and abnormality in sexual matters, and expresses a hostility towards the obsession with the subject shared by puritans and pornographers. The very name of the Sex Pistols is an ironic reference to the fetishing of "sex" and "violence" as definitions of social problems. But does the manipulation of taboo material by bringing it into the open destroy that taboo or reinforce it? In this distinction (which is similar to that between the different uses of rock 'n' roll music in punk) lies the basis for an evaluation of the different kinds of "shock-effect" perpetrated by punk rock.

**Shock-effect and Leisure-effect**

The term "shock-effect" is taken from the writing of Walter Benjamin, a German Marxist of the 1930s, who was among the first to examine the role and nature of the new mass-media of this century. Benjamin felt that these media (film, photography, radio, gramophone) operated in a very different way to the traditional high arts (painting, sculpture, orchestral concert). The traditional arts had their origins in pre-capitalist societies, but the new media of "mechanical reproduction" could only have emerged within industrial capitalism, with its technological innovation and its forms of mass-production.

Mass-production implied a mass-market for the products, which was provided by a proletariat which was culturally developed in certain ways through its mass institutions, and universal education as well a surplus income available to purchase cultural commodities. Unlike many theorists of mass-culture, therefore, Benjamin emphasised the active aspect of the proletariat's role in the shaping of the new media. They were not simply an economic market for the media industry's products, but were responsible for a social demand for a new kind of artistic activity. Benjamin wrote that:

"Mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses towards art. The reactionary attitude towards a Picasso painting changes into the progressive reaction towards a Chaplin movie. The progressive reaction is characterised by the direct intimate fusion of visual and emotional enjoyment with the orientation of the expert."

In his attack on those who viewed the new media as simply a regression from the quality of the traditional high arts, Benjamin paid little attention to the way in which capitalist control of the media can inhibit the development of this "progressive reaction". Taking his formula, we can say that while all media products aim at "visual and emotional enjoyment", the majority do not allow for "the orientation of the expert" in the audience response to them. Benjamin's use of the word "expert" is perhaps confusing. He means a critical response on the part of a viewer or listener, in the sense that he or she will be provoked to thinking and questioning by it. In Benjamin's other writings, the plays of Bertolt Brecht are presented as key examples of progressive art which aim at inducing this "orientation of the expert".

Benjamin saw the "shock-effect" as one way in which this orientation could be produced. It was opposed to an attitude of contemplation which, in the decline of bourgeois society, was "a school for asocial conduct", an evasion of social pressures. In contrast, the shock-effect of, for instance, a Dadaist painting or poem "hits the spectator like a bullet, it happens to him, thus acquiring a tactile quality". Benjamin adds, however, that to be productive, the shock-effect "should be cushioned by heightened presence of mind", its jolt should have a cognitive aspect as well as a tactile one.

In applying this concept to a discussion of popular music and of punk rock, it is necessary to posit the alternative effect with which the shock-effect is in contradiction. This might be termed the "leisure-effect", since its characteristics are those pertaining to the conventional bourgeois definition of "leisure", as an area of passivity as a respite from, and as preparation for, work. The leisure-apparatuses of bourgeois society (including popular

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leisure-apparatus aims to transform that material that have originated in other social practices, the leisure-effects whose main features are a passivity of response and a disengagement from other areas of social activity. Thus, although the raw material of television programmes or popular songs may have originated in other social practices, the leisure-apparatus aims to transform that material into "visual and emotional enjoyment", eliminating the "orientation of the expert", which might lead the audience to make active connections between the programme or song and those other areas of social practice. The shock-effect interrupts this process by introducing new material in forms which are undigested by the leisure apparatus, and unfamiliar as musical material to the audience, who cannot regard it passively, but are jolted by it.

**Shock-effects in Punk Rock**

Punk music is thus a form in which both shock-effects and leisure-effects are present, but in which, generally, the former are dominant. It is, however, necessary to distinguish between different levels of shock-effect, in terms of their ability to dominate or be dominated by the leisure-effect. For in many instances, yesterday's shock-effect serves only as a rejuvenating influence on today's leisure-effect. Punk clothing, torn and held together by safety-pins in a parody of expensive fashions and sexually fetishistic clothing, was soon transformed by the avant-garde of the fashion industry into a new and expensive trend.

Another "empty" shock-effect indulged in by a minority of punk groups and followers was the sporting of swastika armbands as decorations, thereby transferring them from a serious (taboo) context into a frivolous one. But because this was simply a naming of the taboo, it cannot be said to have destroyed it. The ambiguity of the gesture in fact mirrored and strengthened the ambiguous attitude of attraction and repulsion towards Nazi regalia and atrocities, which is a feature of British culture.

A second "intermediate" category of shock-effect is that which challenges the contort of popular music rather than its structure. By content here, I mean the raw material of the song's lyrics. Thus, the social realism of many of The Clash's songs about unemployment or boredom is treated in much the same way as earlier rock groups dealt with the pre-digested themes of romance or a more individualised frustration. Similarly, one of the punk classics, *My Love Lies Limp* by Alternative TV is a remarkably funny song of disgust with a sexually-saturated milieu.

That challenge is the hallmark of the "structural" shock-effect, two instances of which I have previously mentioned. These are the distinctive vocal style of punk singers which is important since a key determinant of a listener's response to a song is the inherited connotations of its vocal presentation (crooner, torch singer, vocal harmony group, white soul, etc.), and the internally contradictory structure of the lyrics in *Oh Bondage Up Yours! A more radical disruption of the conventional lyric-structure occurs in the Sex Pistols' *Holidays In The Sun*. The words of this song are a kind of collage of media and travel brochure cliches and parodic references to them, clustered around the media themes associated with Germany —Belsen, "reasonable economy", the Berlin Wall. Wrenched out of their place in what might be called the *Daily Mail* discourse, the cliches sound empty and ridiculous.

The political significance of this kind of shock-effect depends on its ability to present itself as a seamless webb, fully coherent and non-contradictory and thus natural and eternal. Activities like these punk songs then work to undermine that process of legitimation. The aesthetic roots of such a practice lie in the history of the avant-garde—Futurism, Dadaism, Surrealism and Situationism. The Sex Pistols' mentor Malcolm McLaren was an ex-art student of the 1968 generation and his enthusiasm for the avant-garde undoubtedly influenced the group's orientation as well as their bizarre contractual history—which included the cancellation of contracts by two large record companies before any discs had been released.

A further arena of the structural shock-effect is that of public performance by punk groups whose character varies from a re-creation of the frenzied audience response of earlier cultural revolts to the calculated assault on the conventional audience/performer relationship by the Sex Pistols as well as lesser-known groups like Alternative TV. As in other avant-gardist activities, the political value of taunting or frustrating the expectations of the audience is the extent to which it provokes an awareness in them of their own position in the leisure apparatus.

**Political Significance**

In planning this article, I had intended to deal at some length with the view that punk's primary political significance lay in the degree to which it was a catalyst or an expression of a specific social group clustered around it in a "sub-culture". On this view, the unity of punk as a movement would have been based not on the precarious relation of negativity with the status quo in popular music (the position I have outlined) but on a symbiotic relationship with all or part of the youth generation currently faced with massive unemployment.

Several recent events, however, indicate the imminent collapse of punk as a unified phenomenon, although many punk groups will undoubtedly
continue in existence, in different parts of the popular music spectrum. Some bands will be "rehabilitated" within the music industry's new trend of "power pop", whose title suggests the extent to which it is shorn of all but the most innocuous shock-effects of punk. Others may re-form into a small avant-garde wing of popular music, akin to the position occupied by the jazz-inflicted work of Henry Cow, Robert Wyatt and their co-thinkers. In a different direction, both The Clash and, it seems, Johnny Rotten (following the recent spectacular self-immolation of the Sex Pistols as a group) are experimenting with a union of their more subversive brand of punk and reggae music.

These developments seem to undermine the view that punk might have been the means of expression of a class fraction whose unity was located at a "deeper" level of the social formation, but it is important to stress the theoretical limitations of such a position. These rest, in my view, on an understimation of the role and autonomy of what I have described as the leisure apparatuses of the society. The theory of the "youth sub-culture", expressed most fully in the collection Resistance Through Rituals argues that a working-class youth sub-culture (the Mods or the Rockers) is constructed by the acquisition of various elements from parent or dominant cultures (music, clothes, means of transport) which are then re-combined to express a new meaning which "can resolve, albeit 'magically' the contradictions hidden or unresolved in the parent culture", i.e. that of the working class as a whole. Thus the sub-culture is the site of an unconscious class struggle, displaced from its place in the reproduction of the system's relations of production, posits that all ideological struggle must occur within those apparatuses, and in relation to their structuration by the dominant ideology. The "sub-culture" is thus a series of practices occurring across several leisure and other apparatuses, rather than some sort of liberated area which is purely "working class". The focus then shifts from the politically sterile one of spotting how working-class youth is "unconsciously" resisting bourgeois domination (and the sub-cultural theory does not present us with any mechanism by which this resistance can be brought to consciousness) to one which can locate the contradictions being opened up by challenges to bourgeois hegemony within specific apparatuses.

Conclusion

The revolution in popular music which made it primarily a youth music began with rock 'n' roll in 1955 and went a stage further with the "cultural revolt" of the 1960s. It was a revolution that took place in an era of economic expansion and increasing living standards. These factors coloured even the most progressive of the ideological developments in rock music and its associated youth cultures. Their radicalism was a radical consumerism, aimed at the authoritarian figures (parents, police, politicians) who barred the way to new kinds of consumption (pop festivals, clothes, drugs, sex).

The historical limits of that period are only apparent now that it has been succeeded by a very different economic situation where, in the words of one commentator, "teenage frustration is caused not by fuddy-duddy parents, not by easily-shocked adults, but by an intractable economic situation". In the past, the impact of the "shock-effects" of 1950's rock 'n' roll and 1960's rock music caused a reorganisation of the music industry and its leisure apparatus to provide for new kinds of consumers and consumption. Punk rock represented the first important cultural development in the moment of transition between the period of increasing consumption and one where the expectations of that phase have been frustrated. Hence the intensity of its confusions and contradictions and the ambivalence of the leisure apparatus towards it (censorship/exploitation).

Unlike earlier musics, punk rock has not been integrated into a restructured music industry, so much as fractured along the lines of its own internal contradictions. Its most avant-garde elements, which challenged the structure of an orderly music for consumption under the sign of the leisure-effect, remain excluded. Meanwhile, those who have concentrated on a shift in subject-matter within the conventional formal structures are inside the music industry without necessarily becoming integrated. The introduction of politics into the heart of the leisure-apparatus by The Clash and the Tom Robinson Band is one sign that the demise of punk may mark the beginning rather than the end of a fruitful phase of ideological struggle within popular music.

5 Edited by members of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University and published by Hutchinson.

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